

Signaling Through the Flames: Theatre Fires and Disaster Sociology

By

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ABSTRACT

“Signaling Through the Flames: Theatre Fires and Disaster Sociology” re-examines archival evidence relevant to three of the most destructive and deadly fires in American theatre history:

Richmond, Virginia in 1811, Brooklyn, New York in 1876, and Chicago, Illinois in 1903.

Through the use of the theories of disaster sociology, “Signaling Through the Flames” positions disaster as an inherently theatrical process of disruption, after which various parties, constructed as “grass-roots” communities and “elite-level” institutional groups, compete to gain control of the narrative of the disaster event and, in doing so, contribute in significant ways to creating and disseminating an “official” history of the disaster. This official history often comes at the expense of the memories and experiences of the grass-roots group; “Signaling Through the Flames” works to make these acts of remembering and forgetting visible through reclaiming historical accounts that dispute or resist the accepted record. “Signaling Through the Flames” argues that the narrative and rhetorical tropes used to construct these official histories reinforce and reinscribe the systems of social order that were disrupted and made visible by the disaster event, and thus contribute meaningfully and importantly to the necessary negotiation of sociopersonal identity in the post-disaster paradigm. The dissertation is organized chronologically in three parts, each of which is broken down into chapters. Each part provides an analysis of pre-disaster culture, and a recounting of the disaster event; however, the majority of each chapter focuses on cultural production in the post-disaster paradigm, and how that production either serves or resists social or political acts of remembering and forgetting.

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Introduction: Theatre History through Conflagration

“This awful catastrophe is not the end but the beginning. History does not end so. It is the way its chapters open.”

-St. Augustine¹

The history of theater is rife with examples of the tendency of theatre buildings to burst into flames. These fires are particularly prevalent in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and seem to occur without regard for season, or location, or time of day. Although destructive and deadly fires dropped off as the twentieth century moved along — helped in no small part by the continued development of technologies of hazard mitigation and emergency response — it would be incorrect to infer that theater fires are no longer an issue. Instead of being foregrounded by a system of concern for potential destruction, theatre fires lurk as dangers, underscored by the very measures intended to prevent them.

The nineteenth and early twentieth century produced three fires that stand out as worthy of study, owing to their destructive and deadly nature. These three fires form the core case studies of this dissertation: 1) the Richmond Theatre fire in Richmond, Virginia in 1811; 2) the fire that destroyed the Brooklyn Theatre in Brooklyn, New York in 1876 and; 3) the Iroquois Theatre fire in Chicago, Illinois in 1903. These fires share several of the same situational causes created by similar social contexts stemming in part from the convergence of the industrial revolution with concomitant episodes of urbanization. Among these causes are emerging technologies of theatrical production, with a specific focus on technologies of spectacle, poor architectural design, badly over-estimated hazard-mitigation paired with badly conceived risk assessments, the human tendency towards panic in disastrous situations, and civic mismanagement and managerial negligence. These three fires are given special precedence over a litany of other

theatre fires for their particular devastation: they stand out as the most destructive and deadly events in American theatre history, causing thousands of deaths, and millions of dollars in costs.²

“A Stubborn Refusal to Learn from the Past”

Safe and unchallenged narratives have developed and stick to each of these three fires. While some scholars have returned to the sites of these fires for study, it is often in an attempt to make a point about the relationship between fire’s consuming (disappearing) nature, and theatre’s similar relationship to disappearance, exemplified by Ellen MacKay’s 2009 article *The Theatre as a Self-Consuming Art*:

The catastrophe is swiftly transformed into an indictment of theatre management and city government, and becomes a rallying cry for the reform of fire and building codes that are still in place today...one way of understanding these events is as a series of contingencies that have shaped theatrical practice into a progressively safer, more conscientious art.³

MacKay identifies the problematic nature of reading theatre history according to an evolutionary paradigm that pays attention chiefly to the development of safety precautions and technologies, noting the “grotesque sameness” to conflagrations “that undermines any progressivism in the progression” of theatre’s evolution towards safety.⁴ “What links fourteenth-century Paris to seventeenth-century London to twentieth-century Chicago,” MacKay writes, “is a stubborn failure to learn from the disasters of the past.”⁵ MacKay argues against the simplistic narrative of safety measures by underscoring the ontological connection between calamity and theatre, and that “disaster sets the stage for theatre’s history to be told.”⁶ MacKay’s overarching point is summed up thus:

The reforms implemented to make the theatre safe — like exit signs and fire curtains — have never proved as successful at protecting audiences as they have at reminding audiences that the theatre is marked for burning. Since by its ontological disposition theatre happens by disappearing, and never so unforgettably as when it goes up in smoke, the safeguards to theatrical disaster are also the signifiers of performance’s contract with oblivion, warning us that the only certainty those safety measures can effect is the

theatre's emergent occasions will from now on occur under the sign ('Emergency Exit') of their own risk.⁷

That is to say, the evolutionary narrative of increased safety in theatre is simultaneously perpetuated and destabilized by the persistence of the issue itself: despite the implementation and enforcement of technologies of safety and hazard mitigation, theatres continued to burn down, and people continued to die. In MacKay's argument, theatre buildings don't become safer so much as they come to be marked by their tendency to mirror the practices that take place within: if theatre is marked by the ontological condition of its continual disappearance, the historical tendency of theatre buildings to burst into flames mirrors that condition. The narratives afforded by burning theatres, then — the ones that stick — are cautionary tales and moral examples, attempts to "restore an equilibrium to the order of things that fire jeopardizes."⁸ The irony is that it is the very absence of a theatre that marks the disaster event as worth remembering. The archive is rich with information about disasters because disasters were remarkable events. Scholars often are forced to turn, in the absence of information about the "normal" operations of theatre, to these disastrous events in order to write their histories. As MacKay writes, "the habitualness with which scholars extrapolate the practices of the theatrical past from scenes of theatrical catastrophe," suggests "the theatre's sudden absence makes more of an impression than its unmolested continuance."⁹

Allowing MacKay's theoretical points about the relationship between disappearance and the archive to stand, I aim to take a different view on theatre disasters, to gather evidence under a different rubric to yield a new maxim about the intersections of theatre, disaster, memory, and identity.¹⁰ The most troubling aspect of MacKay's article is the handling of memorial of the Iroquois Theatre fire:

More fundamentally, what dictates *Bluebeard*'s excessive recordings is its grip on public memory; the show's cumulus of documentation underscores by how much the theatre's sudden absence makes more of an impression than its unmolested continuance. In the case of "The Great Chicago Theatre Disaster," as the Iroquois fire is habitually called, we can trace the impression upon the cityscape, for that fire comes down to us as a matter we are enjoined never to forget by the civic commemoration of its obliterating event. There is, for instance, the granite marker in Montrose Cemetery, "Sacred to the memory of 600 people who perished in the Iroquois Theatre Fire." There is too Loreda Taft's Beaux Arts bas relief, once the centerpiece of the Iroquois Memorial Hospital's grand entrance, now installed in Chicago's City Hall. Along with their pietistic remembrance, what these monuments preserve is a quality of historicity that is particular to theatrical performance; with all the concreteness of urban landmarks, they imprint upon the city, and upon those who travel through it, a version of the theatrical past that conveys nothing so much as the volatility of the stage. Of particular salience to this argument is the way they trace the footprint of the theatre as a spectral history, according to which stages that are irretrievably gone loom larger in the public eye than those that remain. The effect is nicely rendered by Anthony Munday, another antitheatricalist from early modern England, whose gaze is drawn to the ruined spaces where theaters have been, by God's flaming finger (he says), decamped: "neither be Theaters where in times past they were."¹¹

MacKay's suggestion, that disasters convey "nothing so much as the volatility of the stage" can be resisted by a new theoretical framework through which to view disasters; a framework which suggests that it is not only what is destroyed or disappeared by disaster that contributes significantly to meaning, but also what is created to fill the void. It is my goal to use the thinking provided by the field of disaster sociology to re-examine fires from theatre's past and, in doing so, to demonstrate that an interdisciplinary paradigm informed through a sociological framework can re-position destruction, death, and disaster away from a citational performance of theatre's historical and ontological relationship to disaster, and towards an understanding of "the volatility of the stage" as playing a vitally contributory role in the on-going processes of social and individual identity creation. To do so is to read "signals through the flames" of theatre's past in order to (re)construct evidence about how theatre disasters — understood both as disaster events and processes related to theatre buildings, and as the inherently theatrical nature of disaster events and processes — create a post-disaster paradigm full of rich cultural production, a

definition for which follows in this introduction. An analysis of these products, through the lens of disaster sociology, reveal the contested negotiations of memory and identity for individuals, communities and societies alike that occurred between elite-level governmental organizations and grass-roots communities, terms pulled from Celesta Kofman Bos, Susann Ullberg, and Paul 't Hart's 2005 article *The Long Shadow of Disaster*.¹² The tactics for negotiating these contested memory narratives is what links these fires together in a way considerably more significant than a "stubborn refusal to learn from the past." How these fires were written about, how evidence was organized, and what ideological agenda shaped the practices of recording the evidence about these fires that can be found in the archive determined how, in the very early post-disaster paradigm, these events would be remembered or forgotten.

Defining Disaster

There are disputes in the field of disaster sociology about what, exactly a disaster is. The term is, to mirror the insight of Mary Strine, Beverly Long, and Mary Francis Hopkins's 1990 essay *Research in Interpretation and Performance Studies: Trends, Issues, Priorities* about performance, an "essentially contested concept, meaning that its very existence is bound up in disagreement about what it is, and that the disagreement over its essence is itself part of that essence."¹³

Ronald W. Perry's chapter *What is a Disaster* in the 2007 *Handbook of Disaster Research* offers an excellent examination of various competing definitions of the term. "What becomes important is the specification of the audience for the definition," Perry argues, "bearing in mind the use to which that audience will put the definition."¹⁴ I believe the use of the term in theatre history is under-theorized, typically used as either explanation the application of a qualitative judgment — "that show was a disaster" — or as a term denoting a specific and

discrete historical event in which destruction of property and/or human life are among the major outcomes. Treatment of disasters in theatre scholarship has been consigned to monographs of single incidents, encyclopedia entries, a handful of scholarly articles, and one 1986 work by Gyles Brandreth, *Great Theatrical Disasters*, that focuses primarily on the qualitative definitions of the term. The prevailing definition of disaster in theatre scholarship is typically citational and temporal; we pick and choose disastrous events in history to mark moments that stand out from the rest of the archive — the 1613 fire at the Globe Theatre, for example — often without context for understanding the pre-disaster sociological factors that contributed to the creation of a disaster-prone environment, or for the broad, post-disaster effects of the events. When the effects are mentioned, they are treated as causal and discrete examples within the larger narrative of the evolution of safety. The events are often summed up in simplistic terms that ignore the patterns that underlie their reality: disasters, like theatre, are socially constructed.

Disaster sociology contends that disasters cannot be constructed through a simple appeal to cause and effect. Disasters are not defined by their linear progression; rather, disasters are rooted in social change, a point first articulated by L.J. Carr in 1932's *Disaster and the Sequence-Pattern Concept of Social Change*, repositioning disaster from being defined as “a product of its consequences” to “the collapse of ...cultural protections.”¹⁵ Carr's insight would largely dominate the construction of the term: more than death or destruction, disaster is defined by its tendency for disruption. This simple shift in thinking challenges a broadly held definition of disaster as a “negative, agent-caused event” and suggests that revisiting historical disasters may yield new readings as making productive contributions to individuals and societies alike through disasters' socially disruptive power.

Anthony F. C. Wallace's 1954 report to the Committee on Disaster Studies, *Human Behavior in Extreme Situations*, further challenges a traditional definition of the term as indicating a temporally discrete event, positing a definition of disaster as "an interruption of normally effective procedures for reducing certain tensions, together with a dramatic increase in tensions, to the point of causing death or major personal and social readjustment..."¹⁶ This reconfigured definition positions disasters not just as "breaks in pattern," but as,

A class in themselves, about which generalizations can and should be made...viewed not as a type of event, but as isolated and annoying interruptions of norms, they present themselves only as unique happenings, hanging in a sort of conceptual limbo...¹⁷

Wallace's point, here, is two-fold: first, disasters defy easy categorization into a single field of study, and only an interdisciplinary approach can properly handle the manifest difficulties in disaster theorization; second, "the social readjustment following these interruptions was also cited as part of the definition of disaster," suggesting that disasters are not temporally discrete events, but ongoing processes of adjustment to newly created social paradigms.¹⁸ Lewis Killian contended that the negative aspects of the definitions of disaster had to be retained, "because people must cope by departing 'from the pattern of norm expectations.'"¹⁹ These disagreements are productive, because they point out the insight articulated by Gary Webb:

When disasters occur, people interpret them in different ways. Some people view disasters as the result of divine intervention. Others regard them as failures of government. And still others see them strictly as natural phenomena. Given this diversity of views, it is clear that disasters are social constructs.²⁰

While there is considerable disagreement over what qualifies as a disaster, there is some agreement between the various competing definitions. All seem to agree that disaster, at its core, is a disruption of normative social functions. Second, all agree that disaster should not be understood in terms of temporal limits, but as the adjustment and readjustment of individuals to newly developing social norms; as Enrico Quarantelli argues "disaster is rooted in social

structure and reflects the processes of social change.”²¹ Third, disasters are best understood in terms of human interaction: “disasters stem not from the agent that causes the disruption” — for the purposes of this dissertation, fire — “but from the social structure of norms and values...”²²

Scott G. Knowles articulates this another way, writing,

Disasters are not external in some magical way to the realities of the human-shaped environment or political culture in which they occur. In fact, it is probably best understood the other way around. In the patterns of property destruction, in the communities damaged and those protected, in the technologies and policies available to limit or avoid them, a disaster mirrors the prevailing values of the society in which it occurs.²³

This methodological repositioning of disasters from temporal events to processional societal phenomena suggests that, in the studying of disaster, it is not only the reconstruction of the narrative of the event itself that matters, but also how the narrative reflects the difficult but necessary process of social change as a result of the disaster. For the purposes of this dissertation, it may also be said that, in analyzing the evidence found in the archive, as well as monographs that have already undertaken the narrativizing of the archival evidence to reconstruct the disaster event, it is not the narrative that counts but what the narrative — and, therefore, the evidence within the archive — reveals about the shifting “prevailing values of the society” in which the disaster occurred.

Some of the terms I use within this dissertation reflect the process-based construction of the term disaster. It is useful to define specifically what I mean: pre-disaster refers to the social and cultural contexts within which normal social systems seem to be working effectively. It is worth noting that these systems are considered effective only until the disaster event occurs, and it is the inefficiencies of these systems that contribute in meaningful ways to creating an environment that favors the development and occurrence of a disaster event. Disaster event refers to the temporally discrete occurrence of the theatre fire. It is in the use of this term that cause-

and-effect carries the most weight, as I work through numerous survivor narratives to form chronological descriptions of the events. Post-disaster paradigms should be understood to refer to the period following a disaster that lasts for an undefined length of time, in which cultural and memorial production occurs; the term “paradigm” is meant to signify a recognition of the pervasive effects of the disruptive nature of disaster on life and existence in the community affected by the fire that require the creation of new and significant organizational strategies for productive social existence. Civic investigations, funeral services, performances of social mourning, religious responses, survivor communities, negotiations about defining the event between elite-level and grass roots memory work, and strategies for constructing and placing memorials to the dead mark the post-disaster paradigm. It is difficult to identify an endpoint for the post-disaster paradigm, but generally I identify endpoints as the disappearance of the significance of post-disaster paradigmatic production to the point where they are accepted within a newly ordered cultural milieu as normal.

Researching and Writing Disaster Histories: Methodologies from Disaster Sociology

The relative youth of the field of disaster sociology has produced a tight, self-conscious collection of scholarship about methodologies for disaster research, and about the history of disaster research. Much of the meta-scholarship about the field yields to the convention of sociological research called “snow-balling,” wherein advances are suggested based on perceived identification of the direction of the field; one idea leads to the next, and to the next, and so on, so that the field “snow-balls.” This means the methodologies articulated by disaster sociologists are inter-related and self-referential. Reading one essay or article on disaster sociological methodologies inevitably leads to citations of numerous other sources. The evolution of the field is extremely easy to track, and presents an ease of access to new researchers. Presently, the field

is moving towards interdisciplinary constructions of disasters, which has opened up access to disaster research to historians, cultural theorists, and memory studies scholars, among others. My dissertation participates in this scholarly evolution by suggesting new vistas for disaster sociology provided by approaches to theatre history, historiography, and performance studies.

“Disasters are, by their nature, interdisciplinary problems, and cut across jurisdictional boundaries,” writes Scott G. Knowles.²⁴ Although Knowles’ statement was more concerned with jurisdictions defined by institutional response teams, the point can be made just as easily to the academic study of disaster phenomena. Disasters offer significant opportunities for interdisciplinary scholarship, and disaster sociology calls for a broad application of the definition of evidence to studies of disaster history. To date, little work has been done in the area of theatre history of disaster aside from single-event, narrativized monographs. While these books often present a strong index of evidence, they resist the sociological perspective of disasters as processes, presenting instead a purely chronological reconstruction of the fire as a discrete temporal event.

The chronological narrative also resists the broad definition and use of cultural production as evidence that reveals narrative negotiation in the post-disaster paradigm. Sociologists have made note of this limited use of evidence, as well. Knowles terms the period between the 1860’s and the 1940’s as “the Conflagration Era...the time of the most rapid growth in the history of the American city.” Knowles writes, “fire...was the most consistent, costly, and widely-experienced risk to both life and property” during this time.²⁵ The underlying idea of this organizational strategy is that fire was a persistent and pervasive existential threat, and so may be used as an organizing theme in the writing of history. Following along the insights offered by disaster sociology, to read history as “signals through the flames” is to identify whatever patterns might

underlie theatre fires as disaster processes, and to produce insights to the unique sociological tensions that develop in disaster's wake. Always, the cry that follows social disaster is that "we must not forget" the disastrous event, lest the victims have died in vain, and the event repeat itself. However, over the course of almost one hundred years, three deadly conflagrations erupted at three different locations, in three different performance circumstances. History did repeat itself: the similarity of patterns that underlie their occurrences, as well as the patterned behavior of each society in the post-disaster paradigm produces a reading of history that resists sententious refrains for memory as a operant force of social change. Fire is used within this dissertation as a thematic way to explore the cultural production of memory in the post-disaster paradigm.

There are obvious methodological issues in re-constructing disaster narratives, but perhaps none bigger than the idea that the archive cannot capture phenomena that is, by its nature, ephemeral, found not in solid evidence but in processes of change. Too, in the days and weeks following the event, a plurality of narratives emerge, often with contradictory evidence, from victims and governments, both working to define the terms of the disaster and, in doing so, gain power over how the disaster is remembered. T. Joseph Scanlon specifically addresses these methodological concerns and more in *Rewriting a Living Legend*, and I found many of his points productive when considering strategies for organizing my evidence.²⁶

One of the major issues between positing a crossover between disaster sociology and these events is that the DRC is primarily interested in contemporaneous disasters that allow for fieldwork to be accomplished. Historical disaster studies are obviously more complicated because, as is certainly the case with my three case studies, there are no survivors left to tell their tales. Instead, I had to rely primarily upon newspapers and disaster books as my documentation. Scanlon notes,

Historical research has limitations. Records are lost or destroyed. Some sources are dead...however, there are also advantages...some statistics and comparative data will exist only because time has passed. Sophisticated methods of analysis may reveal things that were not evident years ago.²⁷

Among the statistics that exists now is empirical data afforded by disaster sociology that demonstrates that typical disaster event narratives of destruction and decay can no longer be cited because such narratives are outdated. Indeed, disaster sociology proves nothing so much as the fact that social formations — configured either as institutional (“elite”) or victim communities (“grass-roots”) — behave in remarkably patterned ways in the days and weeks following the disaster event.²⁸ These patterned behaviors allow for generalized claims to be made. What is difficult, according to Scanlon, about historical research, is locating these patterns without the possibility of empirical fieldwork:

Tracking [evidence] down means poking around in basements or vaults. It also means using unconventional techniques, making one’s interests known, and following trails from family, friends, professional colleagues, or even strangers to written sources, then trying to fit the material into a pattern.²⁹

Faced with these concerns, a sociological reading of theatre disasters calls for new interpretive strategies of evidence contained in the historical records relevant to each fire. Local newspapers offer “an overview of what happened” and offer the opportunity “for creating a list for follow-up later” despite their “notorious...errors of detail.”³⁰ Newspapers also provide a way to understand the competition between elite-level groups and grass-roots efforts to control the narrative of the disaster, as the narrative that emerges from the reporting on the institutional investigation is often in stark contrast to the lush descriptions of tragedy that adorn the front page. Newspapers provide coverage of funeral processions and memorials. Sometimes long after the disaster event, newspapers continue reporting on related topics: articles covering memorial construction, dedication, and the event’s anniversary provide valuable opportunities to read into

shifting cultural contexts. Local newspapers are by no means the only place to look for evidence. Newspapers from other areas of the country (or world) also reveal information about significant social operations: after the occasion of each of these three fires, major metropolitan newspapers around the world published stories about the relative safety of the theaters in their own cities. Newspapers are a valuable point of departure, but cannot encompass the whole of the event. What other sources of evidence may be used to re-create the processes before and after the disastrous event, as well as the event itself?

One answer is disaster books, narrative collections of newspaper articles, trade journals, and first hand stories collated and presented back to the audience. Disaster books have plenty of concerns embedded within them; they are often simply reprints of newspaper sources, and often report second and third hand information as truth. They are often pulpy and graphic in their detail, published as soon as possible after the event in order to capitalize on public memory and sympathy, marketed to a community of interested citizens, so the narrative is often one of outraged indignation, especially in the case of engineering and architectural deficiencies and evidence of managerial incompetence. The value of disaster books as evidence comes from precisely the same concerns for accuracy and legitimacy that may give an historian pause. Disaster books often include evidence from newspapers to which the researcher would not otherwise have access. The second and third hand information reported as fact can provide valuable insight into the cultural production and dissemination of urban mythology that occurs in the post-disaster paradigm. The pulpy, graphic detail, and the resultant outraged indignation provide an understanding for the researcher of the immediacy of the event, and of the emotional condition of individuals in the post-disaster paradigm.

Trade publications offered insight through professional, industry-based responses to the disasters. Often, engineering journals and magazines had valuable information about the practices underlying the building of theaters. Medical journals took up the problems of emergency response times in urban settings, and fire publications offered valuable insight into technologies of fireproofing and the practices of firefighting at the time of the event. Entertainment magazines often featured biographies of individual actors and managers involved in the disastrous events, providing valuable insight into the “characters” involved in these stories. Legal journals analyzed the reasoning behind court decisions related to the disaster events, offering productive agreements or disputes with the elite-level processing of the disaster. Another place were religious screeds and sermons, often published after the events in newspapers and in sermon collections. These sermons articulate a particular vista on the nature of the disaster as it relates to the theatre within the context of socially shared morals. What these reveal is the contentious but shifting nature of the relationship between religion and theatre across the century, as well as the tendency for victim communities to seek solace and comfort from the disrupted social orders in strict, religiously ordered systems. Other sources included personal diaries, letters, and biographies.

There are obvious crossovers here between memory, performance, and sociology that will be articulated in greater detail in the following section, but for the moment I will focus on how the sociological perspective opens up interpretive possibilities for the sources of evidence listed above. In *Remembering: Community Commemoration After Disaster*, Anne Eyre notes that the,

Sociological approaches to the study of ritual as symbolic actions makes an important link for disaster researchers between the physical or biological status of death and the social. They highlight that in considering the nature and meaning of disaster rituals, we need to look at their deeper significance and purpose, and the transition they mark

between one state of individual and social being and another. They suggest that disaster rituals might also be as much about social and political identity and change as about individual expressions of loss, change, and status.³¹

Eyre also calls for a careful consideration of how the post-disaster paradigm plays out in terms of the struggles for memory between the personal and the social: “remembering is an inherently political activity, which can be manipulated for the purposes of socially constructing a community’s past and the design of its future.”³² This point would be taken up in greater detail by Celesta Kofman Bos, Susan Ullberg, and Paul ’t Hart in the 2005 article *The Long Shadow of Disaster* in which the question — which closely mirrors the question at the heart of this project — is posed:

Why are some mass catastrophes more or less ‘forgotten’...whereas others are so vividly remembered in monuments, commemorations, and public discourses?...How and to what extent [are] people and communities victimized by disasters able to shape and correct ‘official’ governmental efforts at disaster investigation and remembrance [?]³³

The point Bos, Ullberg, and ’t Hart make is that “the extent and nature of disaster remembrance is not solely a equation of physical characteristics such as the number of casualties, nor the degree of social disturbance they cause at the time of their occurrence,” but instead exists “as a product of a political encounter between grass-roots memory and the elite-level, political ‘processing of disasters.’”³⁴ Functionally, then, in the sociological construction, memory is a vital part of trying to move on from disaster events, but memory is also configured as site of contestation between the personal and the social. I find this kind of contestation happening in the historical records about these three theatre fires a great deal; disaster sociology provides the vocabulary for articulating this contestation as an historiographical issue:

When we talk about the past and ‘organize history’, we should more carefully ask which parts of the past, whose memories, and what histories are involved. The social process of remembering — here referred to as memory-work — refers to both grass-roots, cultural, and elite-level political practices that shape a society’s understanding of past events in light of present-day conditions (and vice versa)...memory work is not a self-evident or value-neutral activity. In fact, key questions that arise in the wake of a disaster — “what

happened?" "why?" and "how did we react?" — are likely to be a source of dispute and negotiation. We should therefore explore the "entangled process" of political remembrance a little more closely, with particular reference to the remembrance of disasters.³⁵

The implied questions about disaster and memory, then, are less about the event itself, and more about the processes of re-constructing the event inherent in the act of memorialization or remembering. The contested nature of the event suggests that, in order to understand narrative reconstruction of a disaster, the questions we ought to ask — the questions that inform the organization of this dissertation — are "how do political actors...remember the past? How do they organize memory and 'make history?'"³⁶ Whose history is being remembered?

The wide variety of sources afforded by the framework of disaster sociology extends evidence beyond written archival material and presents opportunities to look for evidence in unexpected places. Researching these events, I would often come across contradictory information, anecdotal stories that refuted a majority of the rest of the evidence. Even these — narratives like Richmond's Lt. James Gibbon, Jr., explained in Chapter 2 — stories that are demonstrably untrue, can be valuable pieces of evidence in exposing the social processes at work in memory and forgetting. Taken this way, both the true and the untrue — the convergence of documentary fact and the construction of mythology — can be productive contributions to articulating narrative tensions in the post-disaster paradigm for theatre disasters; as Scanlon writes, "dramatic events inspire fiction, some of it autobiographical."³⁷ The value of evidence in this case is not the relative truth or untruth, but the ability of the evidence to reveal systems of social order, what Scanlon notes is the "fitting information into patterns and using inferences to increase its meaning [that] takes research away from mere description."³⁸ Thus, the patterns of behavior that are disrupted can be understood through the performances undertaken within the new post-disaster event paradigm as contributory to the creation of identity.

From a practical standpoint, trying to narrate the disaster events presented some unique challenges that speak to issues of historical evidence and memory. When sources reinforced and informed each other, the construction of the event was easy. More often, sources challenged and contradicted each other and, sometimes, themselves. Anniversary issues of newspapers covering the fires presented a single source that directly contradicted statements that same source had made previously, including sometimes vital information about who was onstage doing what at what time. Sometimes, narratives were included in the archive despite their unlikelihood or outright impossibility. The disruptions caused by these fires created opportunities for myth-making, and urban mythologies got passed down as fact through the archive in spite of the lack of supporting evidence.

Other issues in this research were establishing discrete timeframes for the events. Notably, all of the disasters occurred with alarming rapidity, lasting, in most cases, no more than half an hour from the first spark to the final ember. In these scant few minutes, an incredible amount of things happened. Most of these events must have happened simultaneously; reading through coroner's inquiries and testimonies presents a plurality of stories that aren't about the same single event. Thus, building a start-to-finish chronological narrative proved challenging. In the interest of transparency, I cannot state that these narrative reconstructions will not contradict some of the archival evidence. This is only because the evidence so often contradicts itself. Every attempt has been made to cite the sources for these narratives, and to present a cohesive timeline of what happened inside of each of the theaters.

Remembering, Forgetting, and Historiography: At the Intersection of Performance and Sociology

Performances reveal social systems, while social systems organize performances. The crossovers between the fields of theatre history, performance studies, and disaster sociology are

numerous. This section notes productive crossovers through similar methodological approaches and rhetorical devices used in the field of theatre studies in order to argue that, while disaster sociology forms the major theoretical framework, this dissertation still contributes towards, and advances, the practice of writing history in the field of theatre and performance studies.

Primarily, in writing a work of history, I take Thomas Postlewait's straightforward explanation of theatre historiography in the form of twelve cruxes from *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography* to provide a way to narrativize the archival material for these disasters. "Certainty," Postlewait writes, "is often attained in matters of who, what, where, and when. But answers for how and why usually remain open to debate among historians."³⁹ Postlewait recognizes that archives participate in "the contemporary processes that identify an event as noteworthy and significant, thus giving it historical status, often to the exclusion of other events," and that interpretation of those documents is involved in "the rhetorical tropes and narrative schemes that historians use to construct the past."⁴⁰ In the act of narrativizing the evidence in the archive, I tried to resist developing themes I had seen in other works on the same topics, allowing instead the themes to occur naturally as a result of the evidence. For example, the 1811 Richmond Theatre fire came at the end of a long, strange year for young America, and a series of natural disasters, and rising political tensions, had left the country with a feeling of apocalyptic certainty. In the telling, the fire felt almost inevitable, the horrible cap to a disastrous year. In the archive, I kept finding thematic evidence of fate, and that influenced my organization of the narrative of the fire based on the evidence located in newspaper articles, disaster books, and religious sermons. In turn, the trope of fate influenced my interpretation of the evidence for understanding how the early responses to the disaster colored and informed memories about the event.

The major theoretical insights I will use from performance studies to complete this study come from Joseph Roach in *Cities of the Dead*, Marvin Carlson in *The Haunted Stage*, Diana Taylor in *The Archive and the Repertoire*, and Odai Johnson in *Absence and Memory in Colonial American Theatre*. The insights offered by these scholars are built upon Richard Schechner's argument for the broad-spectrum approach to the use of performance theory, and each work engages in vital ways with questions about identity and history.⁴¹ These sources provide modes of thinking about the construction of historical narratives and how those narratives interact with the public's ability to remember and forget. There are obvious rhetorical and theoretical similarities between a disaster sociological framework and the thinking produced by these scholars.

Joseph Roach's *Cities of the Dead* puts forth the argument that culture and identity are ongoing processes of remembering and forgetting undertaken within the context of re-production and re-creation he calls "surrogation," the attempt to "fit satisfactory alternatives...into the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure."⁴² This process, Roach notes, is rarely successful, and usually results in the taking up of new sets of performances in an attempt to selectively "forget" the departed. This tragic but necessary forgetting is the heart of cultural and identity creation, recognized as "an ever-shifting ensemble of appropriated traditions."⁴³ This major theoretical insight has created a subsequent wave of scholarship using performance studies to evaluate the "social processes of remembering and forgetting" which Roach identifies as constitutive of culture and identity. Understood through this insight, social actors are the result of a collection of struggles to remember and attempts to forget. The similarities between Roach and Bos, Ullberg, and 't Hart are striking. Both sources suggest that identity is a process always already bound up in cycles of remembering and forgetting. What

Bos, Ullberg and 't Hart offer is way to read the tension inherent in the act of surrogation through a nexus of the personal and the political. In the case of this dissertation, the traumatic departures that have created loss through death are fires – the disastrous agent – while “appropriated traditions” are the cultural and memorial production created in the post-disaster paradigm.

In *The Haunted Stage*, Marvin Carlson builds upon Roach’s insight, noting the inherently “close association of the theatre with the evocation of the past, the histories and legends of the culture uncannily restored to a mysterious half-life.”⁴⁴ Theatre, Carlson argues, is forever obsessed with recreating a disappeared past. Carlson extends this ontological obsession from the physical theatre building to the metaphorical condition of the art form in a process he dubs “ghosting”: the process of using the memory of previous encounters to understand and interpret

Encounters with new and somewhat different but apparently similar phenomena...plays a major role in the theatre.... within the theatre, however, a related but somewhat different aspect of memory operates in a manner distinct from...the other arts...[theatre] presents the identical thing they have already encountered before, although now in a somewhat different context. Thus, a recognition not of similarity...but of identity...⁴⁵

Spaces and bodies, Carlson argues, contain significant, but perhaps invisible, histories waiting to be interpreted. Ghosting operates in theatre through the notion that bodies and spaces are haunted by mental associations with past occurrences that indisputably color the reception of those bodies and spaces. The implications of Carlson’s argument are widespread, and offer methodological insight into connecting the present with the past. I find this insight useful when considering the century long arc of these fires; there are important connections that tie these events together that are not readily apparent in the archive, but that exist, nonetheless. This can be illustrated partly by the way newspapers always offer comparisons between a

contemporaneous fire, and fires of the past; the disastrous event is “haunted” by similar events that have preceded it.

Diana Taylor’s *The Archive and the Repertoire* concerns itself with the transmission of cultural memory and identity through the practices of performance. Performance is “an episteme, a way of knowing, not simply an object of analysis.”⁴⁶ Taylor finds this definition of performance, as a method of transmission, vital because of the body’s ability to transmit that which is beyond the capability of the archive to capture. To these embodied forms of knowledge, Taylor assigns the term performatic, arguing “instead of focusing on patterns of cultural expression in terms of texts and narratives, we might think about them as scenarios that do not reduce gestures and embodied practices to narrative description.”⁴⁷ Taylor’s take on the performatic foregrounds the political consequences of ignoring performance as a method of knowing and transmitting knowledge, a form of resistance against archival violence. In a disaster sociological framework, the performatic may contain significant links to the disastrous event. Taylor’s argument points to the constructed nature of the archive as privileging certain narratives at the expense of others, a point similar to the contested narratives between the “elite-level” and “grass roots” efforts to control narrative and memory identified by Bos, Ullberg, and ’t Hart. Taylor suggests that these disappeared narratives continue to exist, but that they can only be read in a unit of cultural knowledge transmitted and received via the body: a performatic. In essence, this argument follows Roach and Carlson. The performatic is a haunted, but invisible, performance that exists in the physical repertoire of the body, and is made invisible, because of its exclusion from the archive. Taylor argues that this tactic is vital in transmitting knowledge about trauma, because trauma “exceeds the archive’s ability to capture it.”

Odai Johnson's argument in *Absence and Memory*... suggests that the archive is a function of historiography in and of itself because it is constructed by means of a set of assumptions about the value of what is included, which immediately points to the fact that things are left out. Johnson argues these archival absences may offer counter-narratives to the work created through archival research, but that the archive, once constructed, tends only to include items that meet the standards of reinforcing its dominant narrative. Johnson, then, undertakes a study of colonial American drama by identifying the "traces and residues" left behind by "floating ephemera" that did not meet archival standards in order to challenge the dominant narrative of colonial American drama as "player vs. puritan." Johnson's argument is that having "an absence of evidence is not the same as having no evidence" and that by using contextual information, an historian may make assumptions and insights based on what was not included in the archive, and why.

The crossovers between these four works are numerous. The significant performances of remembering and forgetting, understood as surrogation, then, can be understood as a performatic, ghosted by their association to the disastrous and destructive fire. To Roach, culture and identity constructions are the result of ongoing processes of surrogation — remembering and forgetting — as the performers attempt to create a continuity of their own existences. The performances undertaken in these paradigms of loss become normalized to the point of invisibility and remain invisible until another trauma requires the creation and implementation of new performances functioning as acts of surrogation. However normalized and invisible these performances may become through repetition — from tiny, though powerful, performances rife with the fresh stings of the complex interplay of remembering and forgetting to everyday gestures and embodied practices — that invisibility does not mean they lose their significant link to loss. These

performances remain ghosted by their originary association to disaster as they are undertaken in somewhat different contexts. To identify these performances, and to trace them to their origins, is to highlight their significant link to loss, and to point out that the disruption caused by disaster contributes to the process of identity creation, as understood by disaster sociology.

In addition to the methodological insights provided by disaster sociology, and the intersections afforded thereto by performance studies, I also draw from Paul Ricoeur and Pierre Nora's significant theories about the constructions of history and memory. In *Between Memory and History*, Nora makes productive distinctions between memory and history and the need societies have to create memorials to the dead. Real environments of memory — *milieux de memoire* — no longer exist because history is constantly slipping into the past, and that slippage, Nora argues, is accelerating.⁴⁸ Real memory is “social and unviolated, exemplified in but also retained as the secret of so-called primitive or archaic society,” while history “is how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past.”⁴⁹ These sites of history are termed *lieux de memoire*, and are vain attempts perpetrated to make present the ever receding past. Memory is lived and dynamic, “blind to all but the group it binds” while history is “fact, sifted and sorted,” belonging to “everyone and no one.”⁵⁰ Nora's classic work on environments and sites of memory provide ways to tie together the vocabulary of performance studies and memorial as a sociological concept, as well as present an avenue for considering the tensions inherent in the act of memorialization between what disaster sociologists recognize as “grass-roots” and “elite-level” memorial efforts.

Each of the three case studies is organized around Paul Ricoeur's argument for three phases of “doing history.” First, the “documentary phase...that runs from the declarations of eyewitnesses to the constituting of archives, which takes as its epistemological program the

establishing of documentary proof”; next, “the explanation/understanding phase...that has to do with the multiple uses of the connective ‘because’ responding to the question ‘why?’”; and, finally, “the representative phase...the putting into literary or written form of discourse offered to the readers of history.”⁵¹ Ricoeur’s organizing principles recognize that the objective of history is to answer the question “why” through a series of “because” — history as an examination, then, of the cause and effects of events. Like Postlewait, Ricoeur notes “there is interpretation at all three levels of historical discourse... Interpretation is a feature of the search for truth in history that runs across these three levels. Interpretation is a component of the very intending of truth in all the historiographical operations.”⁵² Ricoeur argues that the ultimate historical absence is death, writing

At first sight, the representation of the past as the kingdom of the dead seems to condemn history to offering to our reading no more than a theater of shadows, stirred by survivors in possession of a suspended sentence of death. One escape remains: considering the historiographic operation to be the scriptural equivalent of the social ritual of entombment, the act of sepulcher. ... not only a place set apart in our cities, the place we call a cemetery and in which we dispose the remains of the living who return to dust. It is an act, the act of burying. This gesture is not punctual; it is not limited to the moment of burial. The sepulcher remains because the gesture of burying remains; its path is every path of mourning that transforms the physical absence of the lost object into an inner presence. The sepulcher as the material place thus becomes the enduring mark of mourning, the memory-aid of the act of sepulcher. It is this act of sepulcher that historiography transforms into writing.⁵³

The very act of memorial implies that, without losing the necessity for individual memory, identity can be and is a shared and social concept, as well, a point Pierre Nora makes in *Between Memory and History*. The need for *lieux de memoire* (“sites of memory”) exists only because, as history accelerates into the past, we are sociologically no longer able to exist in *milieux de memoire*, real environments of memory. The suggestion is essentially that a society that knows how to make the past eternally present — a society that knows how to transmit and live their “collectively remembered values” — has no need to construct memorials.⁵⁴ Yet those

memorials indisputably exist, and the process that leads to their construction, and, sometimes, negligence, illustrates a significant source of negotiation between elite-level and grass-roots memory-work in the post-disaster paradigm.

Nora makes the argument that the “collapse of memory” as a method of living is the result of globalization and democratization of culture. If we take this point as read, the insinuation is that cultural colonization is the heart of the issue at which Nora wants to get. “If we were able to live within memory,” Nora argues, “we would not have needed to consecrate *lieux de memoire* in its name. Each gesture, down to the most everyday, would be experienced as the ritual repetition of a timeless practice in a primordial identification of act and meaning.”⁵⁵ Thus, Nora’s argument is that we build memorials to mark absences because we no longer have the means to live in such a way that the past is always present in our lives. Memorials offer a physical marker — a citation — of the past and of the dead. By tying together the physical and sociological acts of sepulcher, Ricoeur argues that the past cannot simply be considered “the kingdom of the dead,” but that the act of sepulcher provides an enduring mark of mourning. The “path of mourning that transforms the physical absence of the lost object into an inner presence” is similar to Carlson’s ghosting; memorials and actions contain significant links to past trauma, and to excavate and analyze those links is to represent the past as more than a theater of shadows.⁵⁶ To write a disaster history is to renew an invisible, entombed historical event, to identify “traces and residues” of the disaster event that may have escaped archival inclusion.

Both performance studies and disaster sociology recognize the disruptive nature of their use afforded by their ephemeral nature; as Peggy Phelan argues in *Unmarked*, “performance...becomes itself through disappearance.”⁵⁷ The same is obviously true of disaster; it is in the act of traumatic disappearance and disruption that a disaster event is defined.

However, both theoretical fields also recognize the necessity of processional rebuilding that must take place in the void created by that disappearance. For performance studies, this process of creation can be read through surrogation and ghosting, through reading absence as a productive contribution to the performatic undertaken in the void. For disaster sociology, the void is, itself, a part of a larger disaster process through the way it reveals the traumatic disruption of social systems of order. In both theoretical paradigms, absence demands careful consideration.

Disasters are disruptive. So is theatre. Disasters produce a phenomenal environment similar to that which is produced by theatre, so the writing of theatre history through the lens of disaster must identify the operations of performances of remembering and forgetting, of burial and sepulcher, that occur within the post-disaster paradigm. If theatre's history is defined in part by its disasters, then it must also be noted that interpreting evidence linked to a disaster's history must pay attention to disaster's inherent theatricality.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into three large case studies, one for each disaster event: Richmond in 1811, Brooklyn in 1876, and Chicago in 1903. In general, I organize these case studies around pre-disaster social and historical contexts, reconstructions and descriptions of the disaster event from archival evidence, and analysis of early cultural production within the post-disaster paradigm.

Writing disaster history is difficult, and it is often the case that the evidence I located contradicts other evidence from other sources. I find these contradictions extremely productive, and argue that their value is in how they reveal the disrupted practices of normalized social systems. Often, this evidence is even demonstrably falsifiable. I embrace the contradictions and contentions that result from the historical research of disasters, and address these contentions

directly, even if it means hampering the discrete chronology of the event. Each case study starts with a description of life in the pre-disaster period. I try to establish these practices because methodologically defining the effects of a disaster is often a function of tracking social change. Robert Stallings notes, “descriptions of conditions, procedures, or typical activities before disaster serve as the logical equivalent of a control group. Differences between pre-impact and post-impact patterns are inferred to have been caused by the disaster rather than by some unknown spurious factors.”⁵⁸

The historical research undertaken for each fire makes up a significant portion of each case study. What is remarkable about the accounts of the fires is how well many of them inform and reinforce one another, and how easy it becomes to identify accounts that are productive in creating a historical recreation, and accounts that could more appropriately be considered examples of cultural production. In *Rewriting a Living Legend*, T. Joseph Scanlon remarks upon the importance of reading disaster accounts critically:

People create records, and the same rules apply for resting validity as apply to checking personal stories. Does the material have internal consistency? Is there any corroboration? Is the account something that reasonably could have been known to the person who created the record? If it is not evident, it is important to ask, “how do you know that?”...Some stories are easy to verify...Other accounts are credible because one meshes with another...Other accounts do not mesh so easily...Some material is credible because the source has no apparent or conceivable reason for bias...Sometimes material is useful because it helps establish credibility of other accounts. The fact that something is not credible does not make it useless.⁵⁹

My narrative reconstruction of the disasters is based on what I have identified as credible accounts of the events of the fire, based on the tendency of such accounts to “mesh” with one another. Each case study also contains descriptions of accounts that don’t “mesh” with other accounts, and I undertake an analysis of these accounts in order to determine what about them can be useful for a theatre historian. I argue that these accounts are useful not so much for their

relationship to the truth of the event, but for how they have colored our understanding of the wide-reaching impact of disaster, and how they reveal the narrative and rhetorical strategies used to define the disaster event in the early post-disaster paradigm.

Worth noting are the numerous similarities in the descriptions of each fire. The descriptions of panic provided herein should be noted for their similarity to the stories that developed from Brooklyn and Chicago. These similarities may be considered as evidence of the use of stock narrative tropes to write about theatre fires, but the fact that these similarities exist may suggest another explanation that informs an understanding of theatre fires through a sociological lens: one goal of disaster research is to produce generalizable principles based on collection and interpretation of evidence. Significantly, these similarities can be seen as narrative tropes when considered as part of the cultural production in the post-disaster paradigm, but it's also likely that the similarities may serve to establish a generalized, modeled understanding of human panic in historical disasters.

Anne Eyre argues that “following disaster, when a fundamental sense of order and security can feel threatened, the potential values of...rituals in establishing feelings of control, belonging, and social solidarity within and beyond one's immediate community is understandable.”⁶⁰ Understood through this insight, personal and social rituals can be interpreted as performative attempts to regain “order and security” over life in a newly chaotic social paradigm. In the wake of disaster, official institutions always attempt to make sense of what occurred. Eyre suggests that this is about “more than acknowledging suffering and giving survivors an opportunity to tell their story through commemorative rituals,” and suggests that it is simultaneously, and to a greater degree “about establishing legal and political processes to address objectively, openly, and honestly the causes of events and the accountability of all involved.”⁶¹

A broad survey of performative responses forms the next section of each case study. These responses reveal insights into the severity of the social order's disruption, and into the methods through which individuals and societies try to re-establish control. This symbolic interactionist view of the post-disaster paradigm recognizes that "disasters impact culture, and culture contributes to disasters."⁶² One method to study how disasters have contributed to social disruption and, thereby, to social re-organization, is to evaluate the cultural products of disaster. These products may include memorials, urban mythology, religious sermons, and legal responses. Analyzing how these products negotiate and use the tropes of memory that come to define the post-disaster paradigm reveals how performances of remembering and forgetting, understood to exist at the intersection of dispute between elite-level and grass-roots processing of the disaster become reintegrated into a new social order, and contribute to "official" and "accepted" narratives of the disaster.

Part I, Introduction:

A Winter of Fear and Trembling: Richmond, 1811

High above the Earth, C/1811 F1, the Great Comet of 1811, arced through the sky.¹ The comet had been discovered in March and its brightness increased as autumn changed to winter; it remained visible into late December. The New Madrid fault line, in New Madrid, MO, first shifted early in the morning on December 16th, 1811. These natural phenomena seemed to punctuate a year of social and political unrest. “Nature appears to have been prodigal in the exhibition of her phenomena, during the present year,” reads an article in the December 27th *Pittsburgh Gazette*; “a fiery Comet has for many months appeared in continual view. - - Tornadoes have ravaged the continent from Maine to Georgia. - - The Ocean has been the subject of Volcanic terror; and new Islands have raised therefrom.”² The magnitude of the quake was epic in scale, and it ranks as the most powerful earthquake ever to hit the continental United States of America, eventually being rated on the Richter scale at 8.1. Its impact and aftershocks were felt up and down the Eastern seaboard, and it is said that the quake famously rang church bells in Boston, cracked sidewalks in Washington, DC, and reversed the course of the mighty Mississippi. “The great scale upon which Nature is operating,” continues the *Gazette* article, “should be a solemn admonition to men...to abandon the pitiful, groveling, schemes of venality and corruption in the prosecution of which they are so ardently engaged...Nature appears, in spasmodic fury, to no longer tolerate the moral turpitude of man.”³ Taken together, the earthquake and the comet must have felt like signs of the coming apocalypse.

Thomas Brown, a resident of Richmond, Virginia, and the future Governor of Florida, later articulated these widespread anxieties:

This was a winter of fear and trembling, especially with the superstitious and weak minded. A large comet had appeared in the fall accompanied by a long season of warm dry and sultry weather, and many speculations were made in the paper about it, some contending that it was approaching the earth and might come near enough to destroy it. There were some severe shocks of earthquakes, the severest ever experienced in Virginia. In Richmond some houses rocked and chimneys fell. The house I lived in so sensibly moved that I sprung out of bed not suspecting the cause. To complete the whole, a crazy man or a knave, wrote a prophecy published in pamphlets that the world would be destroyed on a certain day and many believed it. Some actually died of imagination and fear.⁴

In a winter of fear and trembling, when anxieties related to man's moral turpitude were already heightened, the sociopolitical centrality of Virginia in general, and Richmond, in particular, created an environment in which the desire to escape, for a few hours at least, the inescapable problems of everyday life sent over six hundred people to the wooden theatre in Richmond, located on the North side of H Street, in-between College and 12th Streets on a cold, windy Thursday night in December of 1811.

Richmond in 1811 was a prime environment for a truly powerful disaster to occur because the normative systems of order the underlie social operation were already disrupted, and while the young country had certainly dealt with fires on small scales before, it would be difficult to point to a single conflagratory disaster process that preceded the Richmond fire. A year of dealing with Nature's spasmodic fury, and with the economic calamities that resulted from the growing military tensions between Great Britain and America, suggest that life in 1811 was out of joint, as the underlying systems of political, economic, and social order that guided life struggled to meet the demands of rapidly shifting reality. Already destabilized by nature's spasmodic fury, reality would cap off the year with a brutal disaster event that would come to mark American trends of expansion, urbanization, and technological advancement: the conflagration.

That the Richmond Theatre fire came at the end of a "winter of fear and trembling," contributed to the narrative devices that would be used to mark the event in the post-disaster

paradigm as significant to remember. The natural and disastrous phenomena that marked the year were seen by many as the building rage of a God incensed by “the pitiful, groveling, schemes of venality and corruption” in which Americans were engaged. A year of political struggle and social disruption created an environment pregnant with the opportunity for the creation of religious narrative tropes of judgment and divine justice. When the Richmond Theatre fire occurred on that night in December, preachers rushed to fill the void created “by loss through death” with Christian themed narratives. In Part I, I argue that the early and proactive religious responses to the Richmond fire successfully marked the memorial strategies that would follow, and have largely defined how the event is remembered.

Part I, Chapter 1: The Theatre at Richmond

The Old Academy

The first chapter of this dissertation is about the social conditions in Richmond as they relate to the space upon which the theatre sat, the theatre itself, and the social practices of theatrical production that helped create an environment prone to disaster. I first recount the history of the space and the building to demonstrate the central importance of theatre to Richmond in 1811. Then, I attempt to reconstruct the physical features of the building considered against the context of normal practices of theatre architecture of the time, in order to illustrate a sense of the danger inherent to audiences in attendance at the theatre. This is by way of creating a framework for reading and interpreting evidence related to the fire at the theatre on December 26th, 1811, and for the memorial religious responses that were generated in the post-disaster paradigm.

The location of the theatre was a space of shared significance by 1811, commonly called “Theatre Square,” marked in part by its history, and in part by the popularity of the companies that the building would house. By the time the Richmond Theatre was built in 1806, the space had already been marked by fire. The space had originally housed Chevalier Quesnay de Beaurepaire’s Academy, an attempt at “improving” America by introducing “French culture and the fine arts,” whilst simultaneously improving relations between the USA and France.⁵ Quesnay’s project required the raising of almost sixty thousand francs in the form of subscriptions and donations, and the academy gained the support of notable Virginians, Americans, and Frenchmen alike, and went by the title the Academy of the United States of America. Quesnay made ambitious plans to expand the Academy up and down the East coast, with locations in Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York. Quesnay broke ground on the building

that would become the Academy in the summer of 1786, and returned to Paris in order to drum up further support for his Academy. Though the building was incomplete, it was already being used to house theatrical productions: by that Fall, the building was used by the Old American Company, which opened Richard Sheridan's *School for Scandal* there in October. Quesnay, in Paris, continued to fundraise and make plans for his Academy, but time was not kind to his vision of a grand Academy of learning. Upon the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789, fiscal support and goodwill for the project dried up quickly.

Now stripped of its originally intended educational purpose, the building itself became known, alternately, as the Richmond Theatre, and as the Old Academy. Thomas Wade West, a British import who arrived in Philadelphia in 1790 with his wife Margaretta, his daughter Ann, and his son-in-law John Bignall, had worked to establish a brand new circuit of touring theatrical performances in the less developed South. West and Bignall's group established the Southern circuit, and for many years were the dominant troupe of performers in that part of the country. This regional popularity, and a rough 1796 season in Charlottesville — itself marked by civic fires and a yellow fever epidemic — led West and his crew to explore other cities in Virginia, where he built and operated theaters in Fredericksburg and Petersburg, while he also assumed a managerial role over others.⁶ West and Bignall installed their troupe — who adopted the name of the state in which they were performing, and thus would transform periodically from the “South Carolina Company” to the “Virginia Company” and others — into the Old Academy building, which, constructed of wood, was a terrible fire hazard, and a requisite stop for the thieves of Richmond: West saw fit to keep the company's costume stock in his own lodgings.⁷

As it had never been only a space for performance, the building also famously hosted, in June 1788, the Virginia Convention, with notable political luminaries like James Madison, John

Marshall, George Wythe, George Mason, and Patrick Henry, in attendance, among others.

Theatre Square was obviously a space of considerable political, social, and artistic importance in Richmond and, indeed, in the young United States. The Academy building was eventually retrofitted to better function as a theatre space, but burned down in January 1798, in an event that Richmond historian Samuel Mordecai described as almost predestined: “the Academic, Forensic, *Dramatic Theatre* maintained its latter character and was thought to maintain it well for several years, but it met the fate of almost all similar edifices. Conflagration, but without other disaster.”⁸ Mordecai’s historical note illustrates how prone to fires theatre buildings were, and, at the same time, how little danger a fire in such a building typically posed: these buildings only burned, “without other disaster.” This lack of death concomitant with the destruction of the Academy building contributed to a feeling of safety and security for audience members, despite the obvious and well-known dangers wooden buildings posed. As the Academy was a popular spot for social gathering, when it burned down, calls went out for a less flammable theatre to replace it immediately. The practice of theatre was clearly important to the people of Richmond.

West probably saw the 1798 fire as a blessing; the building was a complete loss, and he had long desired to build the perfect theatrical building. He commissioned famed architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe to design a brand new theatre and hotel building to take the place of the Old Academy at the top of Shockoe Hill. Latrobe’s designs were ambitious, beautiful, and far too expensive. They called for a complex hybrid, featuring an inn, housing for the theatre troupe, a tavern, a shopping arcade, and a performing space with three tiers of box seating and a completely brick facade. Latrobe’s theatre was never built, deemed far too expensive. That Latrobe’s theatre complex couldn’t be funded serves as an early example of the idea of fate that dominates memory and history about the Richmond fire. Latrobe was a visionary of Greek

revival architecture, and his designs may have contributed to a re-formulation of the space away from its ghosting of histories of disaster, theft, and loss, towards a space of unique historical theatricality, performatively referencing theatre's Greek past, while simultaneously serving the immediate needs of Richmond's citizens. At the very least, as well, the expansive and expensive designs would have required a significantly safer construction of the building than the wooden theatre that was eventually built, and it may be the case the brick edifice on the proscenium, in combination with a sturdier roof, would have been enough to successfully staunch the spread of the flames, and allow for audience members to make a safe exit.

Whether Thomas West intended to ever complete a new theatre for Richmond is unknown; in a sort of cruel irony, West died in 1799 after he had moved his family north to Alexandria to live in a theatre under his purchase that was still being constructed. Waking early in the morning on July 28th, evidently fearful that another fire had broken out, West travelled into the painting gallery and fell to the stage, and to his death.⁹ Although he escaped one conflagration, fire — imaginary though it may have been — did indeed cause West's death.

A Gloomy Passage

Instead of West and Latrobe's ambitious, city-defining theatrical complex, a smaller wooden theatre was built on the spot of the Old Academy in 1806. Information about the physical structure of the Richmond Theatre is sparse, but a functional description can be constructed through first person accounts of the theatre and the conflagration. Here I attempt to use historical evidence to reconstruct, through description, the layout of the building. Doing so will provide the reader with a model for the theatre, and can help explain how and why the design of the building contributed to the panic and death that occurred on December 26th, 1811. Significantly, the themes of panic and death that emerged in survivor narratives contributed to

constructing the event as a form of divine judgment through their capacity to illustrate the instability and fleeting nature of safety in the theatrical space. Understood this way, the design and layout of the theatre contributed greatly to death and destruction during the disaster event, and to religious responses that developed in the post-disaster paradigm. The evidence I use comes primarily from descriptions of the building given to newspapers and the civic investigational panel by survivors following the fire.

The building was three stories high and made primarily of wood on the exterior, with brick supports. It sat in a footprint of ninety feet by fifty feet, and was surrounded on four sides by forty yards of grass. Rows of windows adorned the front of the building, and the highest among them was a bull's eye window, a semicircular window near the top of the gable end. Most audience members entered into building through the North side front door — there were separate doors for access to the gallery and the stage — pushing the door inward to find themselves in “a gloomy passage, between two naked brick walls.”¹⁰ This “gloomy passage” served as lobby for the theatre, and terminated in “a partition door where checks were received.”¹¹ The gloomy passage also provided access, via a narrow and angular set of stairs to the first and second levels of box seating. Supported by wooden pillars that creaked under the weight of audience members, the stairs terminated at half-stories in small landings before a ninety-degree turn continued the ascent. That the box seats and pit shared a common entrance and exit was something of a curiosity in theatrical architecture at the time, being designed often with an attention paid to the theatre's role in social consciousness and class stratification.¹² It was also extremely dangerous, and it guaranteed that, in the event of an emergency, an enormous portion of the audience would be competing for egress in the same small lobbies and stairway. Access to the particular boxes on each level was provided via a small lobby and two small hallways, each built so narrowly that

“two persons could scarcely pass at the same time.”¹³ These lobbies probably faced the front gable of the building, and a Richmonder standing in the lobby would have been able to look out onto H Street.

The interior of the building reflected mostly typical theatre arrangement of the nineteenth century: a semicircular row of benches formed the pit of the theatre, where the average citizen of Richmond would have found himself or herself. Over the pit, in the ceiling, was a dome. The ceiling itself was exposed wood, wrapped with canvas, and painted to match the box seats. Across the ceiling, exposed wooden collar beams supported the roof. In front of the benches, there was an orchestra pit where musicians would play along with productions, and for the popular and bawdy intermezzo songs and dances that broke up long evenings of performances. Along the sides of the theatre, suspended in the air by wooden pillars, were two rows of box seats, their fronts wrapped in painted canvas. Level with the uppermost box seats was gallery seating, a place reserved for the lower-class citizens of Richmond, which sat the poor, prostitutes, free blacks, and slaves. The gallery had a separate entrance and exit, built so these patrons would not have to be seen nor interacted with by Richmond’s more “morally sound” population. This separate exit provided the gallery patrons with a remarkably quick, easy, and safe escape from the theatre, and would inadvertently contribute to the conspiracy theories that developed and circulated in the post-disaster paradigm. Behind the proscenium arch of the stage was a system of pulleys that hoisted set pieces and backdrops into the air, supported by one of the collar beams built into the ceiling structure. A green room, dressing rooms, and an office were also housed in the backstage area, and a private stage door provided the actors with a quick and safe exit outside.

As was typical of many early nineteenth century theatre buildings, the Richmond Theatre was cheaply and quickly constructed. The roof and walls were unsealed and un-plastered, being instead wrapped in canvas and painted for the sake of aesthetics, and the pine of the roof, pregnant with resin, had sweated its contents over five long, hot, humid summers. Virginians were aware of the cheap, poorly built quality of the theatre, and most considered its continued existence as something of a curiosity. It was assumed that it would be just a matter of time before the building met “the fate of almost all similar edifices.”¹⁴ After the disaster, the Committee appointed to study the fire at the theatre would ask, in its official report,

How numerous were the occasions on which it had long before been said, as the crowd was slowly retiring at the end of a play, “Suppose the house were on fire, what should we do?” Yet we slept with too fatal security over the evil — we trusted and we are ruined. New doors were not opened; the winding stair-case was not straitened; the access to the avenues of the theatre was not enlarged.¹⁵

It is easy to read the Richmond Theatre fire as the third part of a trilogy of spectacular natural phenomena related to the public display of God’s fury. When the *Pittsburgh Gazette* noted, on December 27th, just days before the Richmond Theatre fire, that the Great Comet and the New Madrid Earthquake should serve as “a solemn admonition to men...to abandon the pitiful, groveling schemes of venality and corruption in the prosecution of which they are ardently engaged,” and warned such signs indicated a rejection of “the moral turpitude of man,” it was issued as a warning: change your ways while you still can. That the Committee of Investigation noted the “too fatal security” over the evil of complacency that marked social attitudes towards improving upon the buildings’ obvious flaws suggests a way to view the fire as the inevitable result of vainly refusing to heed God’s spectacular warnings; the Richmond Theatre fire was the doom portended by the Comet and the Earthquake, the fruition of man’s

ruinous trust. The theatre was a virtual deathtrap in waiting, a tinderbox ready to explode, an inevitable inferno. All it lacked was a spark.

Part I, Chapter 2: From Candle to Inferno

The People Are All Dead, or Fast Asleep

This chapter is primarily concerned with describing the events within the Richmond Theatre that occurred when the flames began to spread, and panic set in, as based on what I have identified as survivor narratives collected by the Committee of Investigation and the *Richmond Enquirer*.¹⁶ This method of research and interpretation is a typical example of the kind of writing demanded by disaster histories, which involves significant on-going analysis of the credibility of survivors' narratives. Later, I identify in-credible narratives, and analyze how and why they entered into the historical material relevant to the fire, and how they hold, in some cases, a significantly more powerful allure to researchers and historians than credible survivor narratives.

Louis Hue Girardin served as principal of the Hallerian Academy, a private school housed in “a large and ugly block of brick buildings” founded by the “impudent” “German or Swiss adventurer” C.S.L. Haller in 1807 at the corner of Eighth and Cary St. in Richmond.¹⁷ Mordecai writes that the one redeeming quality of Haller's existence was his ability to “select good teachers,” so it's no surprise that Girardin, Professor of Modern Languages, Geography and Civil History at William and Mary, was brought in to run the Academy for Richmond's elite youth, including Caroline Homassel, a sort of adopted niece/daughter to the prominent Gallego family, and others. David Doyle had formerly aided Girardin in his job, and the two men remained close friends. Girardin was responsible for the translation of Denis Diderot's *The Father, or, Family Feuds* that the Placide and Green Company was premiering that night, and was in attendance at the theatre with his wife, as well as his friend David Doyle, and many of the members of the Hallerian Academy board.

On the board of the Hallerian Academy sat some of the most important names in Virginia and national politics, among them John Jay Marshall, former Secretary of State, Virginia Representative, and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court; former Governors of Virginia William Cabell and John Page; John Wickham, who acted as defense attorney during the treason trial of Aaron Burr; former Mayor of Richmond, pioneering surgeon, and City Postmaster William Foushee; former Mayor, distinguished physician and Philadelphia Convention Delegate James McClurg; *Richmond Enquirer* publisher Thomas Ritchie; and former Representative, Senator, and President of the Bank of Virginia Abraham B. Venable, among others.¹⁸ The Academy was a significant nexus of Richmond's social life, and it is not surprising that many of the aforementioned individuals would be present at the theatre on the evening of the 26th of December. It was equally as unsurprising that many of them contributed significantly to the religious and memorial narratives that developed in the post-disaster paradigm through their social positions by financial contribution to, and social support of, a subscription scheme to fund and build a Church that would serve as Monument to the dead.

The theatre was packed the night of the 26th. The Richmond Committee of Investigation later reported, "there were in the pit and boxes 518 dollar tickets and 80 children — exclusive of the 50 persons who were in the galleries," well over capacity for the relatively small building.¹⁹ It was an exciting time in the Capitol: the legislative season was preparing to get underway, so representatives from all over the Commonwealth were in the Richmond area, and the city was pregnant with post-Christmas excitement and merriment. Many in the theatre represented the best of the Richmond elite: in addition to Girardin and his wife, were newly-elected Governor George W. Smith, Bank President Abraham Venable; Benjamin Botts, the lawyer, who had served with John Wickham during Aaron Burr's trial, and his wife Jane. Many of the youth of

the city were present, as well; the war hero Lt. James Gibbon, Jr., who had served on the USS Philadelphia during the Barbary Wars, was at the theatre, and so was the woman he loved: the beautiful and popular Sarah Conyers, described as “the fairest flower of Virginia in the sprightly morning of its youth” and many of their friends, among whom was Miss Caroline Homassel, a sprightly woman of eighty-nine pounds.²⁰

That theatre was not particularly well regarded from a religious point of view is inarguable, a fact I examine in detail in the following chapter. The tensions between the religious construction of theatre as participating in the moral decay of humanity, and the presence of the politically and socially powerful at the Richmond Theatre the night it burned down reveals vulnerability in the religious conception of the Richmond Theatre fire as God’s justice: all of the people noted above bestowed an air of legitimacy and propriety on the theatre and its offerings, reducing, or even eliminating, any trace of moral impropriety. Bos, Ullberg, and ’t Hart argue, “the bigger the disjunction between victim-level memories and claims, and the government’s post-disaster policies, the more likely it is that the history of a disaster will be revised over time.”²¹ The Richmond fire was fundamentally defined, in the post-disaster paradigm, by the powerful rhetorical tropes used in religious responses to the event, to the point that distinguishing between governmental and religious policies is almost impossible. In the broad reconstructive strategies undertaken through memory-work relevant to the disaster, religious and governmental responses tended to define the audience as a cohesive whole, as opposed to individuals.

Homassel and Conyers were socialites, of a sort, and sisters of another sort. Homassel was the child of French immigrants who settled in Philadelphia, the fourth of five children. The Yellow Fever epidemic in 1798 wiped out the entire family, save Caroline and her father

Charles, and Caroline was sent to live in Richmond with her uncle John Richard and his wife Mary Dixon Richard, while her father returned to France.²² Charles died in 1806, and young Caroline continued to live happily in Richmond, often spending time at the home of neighbor Joseph Gallego and his wife, Mary Magee Gallego, who had similarly adopted a “niece” of their own in Sallie Conyers.²³ The Gallegos had been friends of the Richard family in Philadelphia, and when Joseph Gallego moved to Richmond to be nearer his wife’s family, the Richard family, Caroline in tow, made the move as well, and the families went into business together at the Gallego Flour Mill, one of the antebellum world’s finest producers of flour. In the box behind her sat the merchant John Lynch, and his close friend Lt. James Gibbon, Jr., a war veteran and officer of the Navy who had suffered a year of imprisonment at the hands of Tripolitan pirates when the USS Philadelphia ran aground during the First Barbary War in 1803. Upon his return to America, Thomas Jefferson subsequently promoted Gibbon to Lieutenant in 1807, a family friend. His parents set there, too, his father, James Gibbon, the famous hero and leader of the Forlorn Hope at Stony Point, now a pensioner owing to injuries sustained during his military service, and his wife Anne Phyle Gibbon.²⁴

People were excited about the slate of productions for that evening. A letter had been published in the *Virginia Patriot* on Christmas Eve extolling the virtues of *The Father* as translated by Girardin, prefiguring it as a return to a “true and legitimate Drama” from “the degeneracy...of the London Theatres”:

We have perused this interesting Drama [The Father]. It breathes throughout the whole the most purest morality and the most affecting pathos; in short, it is a family picture of masterly design, and exquisite coloring... It would be sufficient evidence of the merit of The Pere de Famille that it has been noticed with approbation even by the fastidious La Harpe in his Cours de Literature, “a monument” says a writer of celebrity, “raised to the glory of the French nation” & that it has been praised by Voltaire and other eminent critics; but a still higher evidence is, that it has enjoyed, and still continues to enjoy, in the country of its birth, the most flattering applause. We therefore congratulate the public

on the refined banquet thus prepared for them...the translator of this celebrated Comedy needs no eulogium from our pen. He has already acquired such marked distinction by the purity and classical elegance of his English style, that any farther praise from us would be superfluous. The public however will be gratified to learn that the peculiar adoption of the character of the play, to the talents of the performers, is such, as to enable each to display his best stile of acting.²⁵

Note that the anonymous author of the *Patriot* opinion piece builds Diderot's play as making a positive contribution both to theatre and to the Richmond community, perhaps anticipating a religious resistance to the performance. *The Father* went off without a hitch, and "all were gratified with its successful representation."²⁶ The intermezzo consisted of four parts: a comic song, sung by Thomas C. West, son of the late Thomas Wade West, a dance by Placide's daughter Eliza, another song by Cornelia Thomas, and finally, a hornpipe by "Miss Placide."²⁷ George Wyeth Munford, a young resident of Richmond at the time, reports the song was "Major McPherson and Miss Lavinia Scout," a wistfully violent but funny tune from the 1807 Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, production of *False Alarms; Or, My Cousin* by James Kenney, with music attributed to M.P. King.²⁸

It was during the final performance of the evening, the pantomime of *Raymond and Agnes*, known also as *The Bleeding Nun*, when things went wrong. *Raymond and Agnes* was adapted from the popular novel *The Monk* by Matthew Gregory Lewis, which had experienced considerable controversy and popularity after its initial publishing in 1796. What was most probably the script for Placide and Green's adaptation of *The Monk*, written by Henry William Grosette, seems to have circumnavigated the controversy concerning the novel's depictions of sexual violence by excising many of the characters and plots that would have been involved: absent is the main thrust of the plot involving Ambrosio, the outwardly devout titular monk who harbors deeply seeded impulses of sexual violence, and the numerous women he seduces. About the play, George Wythe Munford writes, that *Raymond and Agnes* "had never been performed in

Richmond. It had rarely been performed anywhere, for it was supposed to be a covert attack upon the institution of nunneries and the religion of the Roman Catholics.”²⁹ Munford’s suggestion is that the work was at least well-known enough to be recognized for its controversial subject matter, and this reinforces the idea that what was presented at the Richmond Theatre was a version of the popular Grosette script.

Examining the plot of *Raymond and Agnes* is important for its ghosted association with the disaster and, thus, it’s contribution to what Gary Webb calls “the popular culture of disaster.”³⁰ Webb notes, “a growing body of research,” in the field of disaster sociology, “focuses on the ways in which culture puts people at risk.”³¹ *Raymond and Agnes* must be understood as such a play, and applying Webb’s insight produces a quadrivalent and productive understanding of the term “risk.” From a physical standpoint, the Richmond Theatre was a known environment of deadly risk; risk that was not mitigated by reconstructing exits, widening and straightening stairs, and building larger vomitoria. From a spectacular standpoint, the atmosphere demanded by *Raymond and Agnes*’ dark and foreboding plot contributed directly to the fire through the respective lighting and extinguishing of candles to meet the needs of the shifting scenes. From a religious standpoint, theatre as an institution put the souls of its patrons at risk through its contribution to moral decay. From a critical standpoint, the play critiqued and attacked religion as an institution, and Munford identified the perceived attacks embedded within the text of the play upon religious institutions. These four examples of culture that “puts people at risk,” illustrate how the lurid and violent content of the play may have contributed to the religious fervor that marked the post-disaster paradigmatic responses to the fire. Given the popularity of the piece, evidenced by the large turnout for that evening’s performance, it seems likely that the play’s thematic explorations of sexuality, violence, and religious hypocrisy would

have greatly encouraged clergy to point to the conflagratory fate of the theatre as an example of God's judgment of acts of blasphemy the script performs.

Grosette's *Raymond and Agnes* is rich in irony and foreshadowing, both given the content of the story and its position on stage that night in Richmond. Claude (Mr. Burke), seemingly a kindly traveller, comes upon the broken-down carriage of Don Raymond and his servant, Theodore (James Rose). Claude brings Raymond and Theodore to the house of Baptiste (Placide) and his wife Margaretta (Charlotte Placide) that they share with their sons, Robert (William Twaits) and Jacques (William Anderson.) When admonished by Raymond to knock at the door, Claude replies, "I will try again; but I believe the people are all dead, or fast asleep," issuing an ironic foreshadowing of the disaster to come.³² Baptiste finally answers the door, and tells Raymond and Theodore, "I hope you will excuse my not opening the door before; but this forest is infested with a desperate gang of banditti... Truly, signor, you were fortunate in having my friend Claude with you, or you would have run some risk of falling into their clutches."³³

When Jacques and Robert enter the cottage, Raymond remarks that they are well armed with daggers, and Robert suggests that, though they've never been the victims of roughness, it's better to be safe than sorry. Jacques suggests "no person can tell what may befall him, even when he thinks himself most secure," a mirror of the "too fatal security" with which the Committee of Investigation treated the known dangers of the Richmond Theatre.³⁴ Of course, Baptiste and Claude are in league with each other, and Baptiste, who earlier complained he was left to "prowl alone and seek my prey" without a victim, is eagerly preparing to murder both Raymond and Theodore with the aid of his sons. Margaretta, meanwhile, has been suffering a bout of conscience, and exclaims that she doesn't know how much further she can go on with this violent lifestyle and helps Raymond thwart numerous assassination attempts undertaken by

Robert before spiriting him away. Meanwhile, in the forest, Agnes (Mrs. Young) and her servant Ursula, returning from the convent of St. Clare to Agnes' family home, have lost their way. Accompanied by Conrad, they are stopped and offered help by Claude.³⁵ Agnes, Ursula and Conrad follow Claude back to Baptiste's house, where they meet Raymond and Margaretta, as well as the murderous Baptiste, Robert, and Jacques.

Baptiste's cottage is described by Grosette as "a miserable Chamber in the cottage - a door, RUE - a window, with iron bars, CF - a bed, L3E, with a chair and a table close to it."³⁶ The scene was lit by a chandelier, "apparently hanging from the ceiling of the cottage, but in fact suspended by cords, which worked over pulleys inserted in the collar-beam of the roof of the theatre."³⁷ The chandelier was only partially lit — "it was fixed with 2 wicks to it; one only of them had been lit" — possibly in order to signify that occurrences of the play at nighttime, and possibly to heighten the frightful nature of the play, and the darkness of the cottage chamber.³⁸

After she is tricked into drinking poisoned wine, Agnes passes out and Raymond, saved from this same fate by a timely warning from Margaretta, feigns unconsciousness. Seeing his opportunity, Baptiste draws his dagger and approaches both Agnes and Raymond, when Margaretta yells "now!"³⁹ Ending his feigned sleep, Raymond springs to his feet and arrests Baptiste's arm; they struggle together until the dagger drops, and Margaretta retrieves it, stabbing her husband in the stomach. Margaretta and Raymond make plans to escape and gather up Agnes, Theodore and Ursula, and they proceed into the night. Robert, Jacques and Claude re-enter, and, upon seeing the dead Baptiste, kneel, crossing their swords over the dead body, and swear revenge for his murder. The first act ends in this tableau as the curtain drops.

"Here is the first link in the chain of our disasters," reads the Committee of Investigation's report on the fire. The one-candled chandelier — "*this fatal lamp*" — remained

lit, and the violence foreshadowed by the banditti's dialogue in the first act would come to harsh reality: "no person can tell what may befall him, even when he thinks himself most secure."⁴⁰ As a cultural product, the fire at Richmond would forever ghost *Raymond and Agnes*. It is clear, though, that the ghosted association should not be understood only as an "identical thing...in a somewhat different context" as Carlson argues.⁴¹ Instead, *Raymond and Agnes* must be understood as a piece of culture that puts people at risk, and that contributed to the disaster process at Richmond through its inherent relationship to risk, making the significant link to the disaster not simply a matter of contextual recognition, but of contextual contribution.

Thirty Perches

Pierre Nora articulates the difference between memory and history by explaining that real memory is "social and unviolated, exemplified in but also retained as the secret of so-called primitive or archaic society," while history "is how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past."⁴² In Nora's estimation, societies build memorials because their ability to remember the past continually slips into oblivion. Memory binds groups together. The narratives relevant to describing the fire at Richmond support this insight for their tendency to overlap and reinforce each other in significant ways. This section is concerned with the immediate memory produced by the Richmond Theatre fire, and attempts to build a description of the events of the fire by combing through this litany of survivor narratives. In doing so, Richmond is configured as a *milieu de memoire* — a real environment of memory — in the immediate post-disaster paradigm, in which the immediate memory narratives contribute through a "social and unviolated" nature to the creation of identity in the disrupted society post-disaster. The narrational solidarity illustrated by the overlapping and reinforcement of the numerous narratives serves as a mirror to the social solidarity that disaster sociologists argue

develops following disaster events.⁴³ In the next chapter, I'll illustrate how the construction and development of memorial tropes contributed to the slippage of memory into history.

Girardin left at intermission, intending to return home. There in the lobby, he found his friend David Doyle, and invited Doyle to join him at his house. They left the building into the cold December night. "We had not gone thirty perches," Doyle wrote, "when we heard a confused noise; on looking around, we perceived the Theatre, for the most part enveloped in flames."⁴⁴ At some point prior to that night's performance, probably during a rehearsal for the scene shift between Acts I and II of *Raymond and Agnes*, company member William Anderson stood in the wings, waiting to make his re-entrance in Act II, Scene 2 as Jacques, alongside Billy Twaits and Thomas Burke. Anderson must have craned his neck upwards as the carpenter hoisted the chandelier fifteen feet into the air, and saw the device swaying. Anderson noted that, because of the poor pulley mechanism designed to lift the lamp, the chandelier's movements were "unskillful" and the pulley caused it to "ride circularly 'round."⁴⁵ If he remarked upon this to anybody, it was ignored.

After the curtain fell on Twaits, Burke and Anderson at the end of Act I, that scene shift occurred. There's a curious jump in time of at least several hours in Grosette's version of *Raymond and Agnes*, and Act II picks up with Raymond, Theodore and Margaretta being led outside the Castle Lindenberg, having safely delivered Agnes and Ursula back home. Moving from the inside of Baptiste's cottage to the outside of the gates, late in the middle of night, called for different lighting and sets, and the order was given to raise the chandelier from Baptiste's cottage; one candle remained lit. There's an issue with the evidence about the fire here that has never been properly explained: the danger posed by a candle in a mostly wooden theatre seems obvious, especially given that the location of the building would have been haunted by the fire

that destroyed the Old Academy in 1798. Given this obvious danger, why it was not established with the crew of the theatre that the chandelier was to be lowered, and its candle extinguished between acts is unknown. I suspect there are two ways to answer the question. First, because *Raymond and Agnes* was a premiere, it's likely that the scene shift had never been fully executed in rehearsal, and what Anderson reported to the Committee of Investigation about the chandelier's tendency to oscillate circularly was most likely observed during a time when the candle was unlit. Second, there was probably an issue of expediency as the crew worked to complete the change as quickly as possible. The testimony of the unnamed stagehand that was charged with the operation of the pulley system reinforces this explanation, as he was repeatedly ordered to raise the chandelier despite his protestations about the candle.

It's also unknown who gave the order to raise the chandelier. The stagehand reported that the voice came from behind him, and that he supposed the voice was "authorized to direct him."⁴⁶ In spite of his arguments about the danger of the still-lit candle, the order was repeated.⁴⁷ When Mr. Rice, the property-man of the Richmond Theatre, saw what was happening, he demanded the stagehand lower the chandelier, saying thrice "lower that lamp and put it out." However, because he was involved in the hectic backstage area during the scene shift, Rice was too distracted to ensure that the lamp was properly extinguished.⁴⁸ Thomas C. West was backstage, preparing to enter in the role of the Old Servant, when he heard Rice make those demands, and saw the lit chandelier dangling high in the air above the stage.

Mr. Cook, the theatre's head carpenter, saw the young stagehand trying to follow Rice's orders to lower the chandelier, but the pulley system tangled, the cords slipped off of the rollers, the ropes got stuck, and the chandelier swayed back and forth several inches, precisely as it had done when Anderson had noted the issue earlier. Another of the theatre's technical staff, Mr.

Yore, watched as the stagehand struggled to lower the stuck chandelier, commenting that the stagehand “jerked it and jostled it, that it was thus swerved from its perpendicular attitude, and brought into contact with the lower part of one of the front scenes.”⁴⁹ There were thirty-five scenes hanging in the fly-loft, depictions of skies and roofs and trees, all of which were painted on canvas, and covered, in the back, by hemp fibers; the same rope that that held aloft the chandelier. Jerking, jostling, and swinging, suspended aloft in a fuel-rich environment of hemp, wood, and flammable grease-painted canvas, the candle probably didn’t even have to come into direct contact with one of the scenic paintings in order to ignite it. The fire immediately, and aggressively, crept upwards towards the unfinished, exposed wooden ceiling. As it heated and displaced air, the flame sought more oxygen and was pushed upwards, “tapering *above it* to a point... [and] reached the roof, which was elevated 6 or 7 feet only above the top of the scene.”⁵⁰

Hopkins Robertson had seen the fire begin, but thought little of it — it was “no bigger than his handkerchief” — and such flare-ups were common in early nineteenth-century theatre.⁵¹ Thomas C. West reinforces this commonality of disaster: as he entered the stage, ready to begin his part, he recalled having heard “some bustle behind the scenes,” but was unworried about it, figuring it to be a fight between members of the company.⁵² Even the cry of fire from backstage did not stop him, because “little accidents of this description had often taken place,” and when another cry came from the wings — “don’t be alarmed” — he repeated this to the audience. Robertson entered behind West, and trying not to panic the packed house, motioned for them to leave the stage. He must have looked back to check on the status of the fire: *surely, such a small fire was no problem to extinguish*. When he saw how large, and how rapidly, it had grown, Robertson dropped his pantomimic performance, and yelled, “the house is on fire.”⁵³ Cook ran to the carpenter’s gallery and tried to cut down the set piece that was in flames, and while “he *did*

succeed in letting down some of the scenes upon the floor...he could not distinguish the cords of the scene, that was then on fire,” and, fearing for his life as the flames reached the roof, was “compelled...to fly for his life.”⁵⁴ In trying to help, Cook succeeded only in providing for the fire easy access to the stage. It must have looked like it was raining fire in the theatre, a spectacular and thrilling special effect of stage magic. Flakes of burning scenery began to fall from the fly-loft. It was a moment of elation and confusion: “the alarm of fire was immediately succeeded by a cry of, ’tis a false alarm, there is no danger,’ and as we did not imagine any, both Lieut. Gibbon and myself, endeavored to quiet the apprehensions of the ladies in the box,” wrote John Lynch.⁵⁵

“The house is on fire!”

M.W. Hancock fought through the crowd to retrieve his niece, a friend of Conyers and Homassel, but by the time he made it to the box, the fire Lynch and Gibbon “did not imagine” had become reality; Hancock found the box empty. Conyers had been taken by Lynch and Gibbon, Homassel by Thornton, and the others had done their best to escape. Finding the seats empty, Hancock noted, “the flames were approaching with a degree of fury and rapidity that perhaps was never exceeded.”⁵⁶ The theatre transformed from “a scene...all bustle, confusion and consternation” into “one of awful horror and desperation that beggars all description.”⁵⁷

Hancock’s description offers the first example of phenomena that would come to mark the way in which information about theatre fires was recorded. The use of the term “scene” to describe the building suggests a way to think about the event as inherently theatrical. It is no accident that, when describing the Brooklyn Theatre fire in 1876, actor Kate Claxton invokes the same metatheatrical language. It is similarly no accident that the *Chicago Tribune* describes “two audiences” present at 1904 reopening of the Iroquois Theatre a year after the building was gutted. The invocation of metatheatrical language in all three fires found in the archives reveals

descriptions of human struggle to come to terms with the traumatic unreality of the disaster event through the invocation of a more easily explicable framework of theatrical unreality. By its nature, theatre tends to operate within an agreed upon contract between audience and performer in which audience members willingly abide by the disruptive qualities embedded in theatre's reproduction of unreality as reality. The violent shift from unreality back into reality that characterizes the rapid onset of a disaster event leaves residues of theatre's contract with the audience embedded within the disaster process. Metatheatrical narratives of the disaster pick up on these residues. In the use of a metatheatrical language to describe the event, theatre serves as a convenient framework to offer a method for navigating the unbelievable reality of the disaster event.

Hancock's narrative reinforces this narrative phenomenon. By terming the interior of the Richmond Theatre "a scene.... that beggars all description," in which "all ceremony was forgotten in conforming to the first law of nature," Hancock theorizes how the transformative power of disaster operates upon normative definitions of space and identity: the disaster extended beyond the boundaries of the stage, into the house, and out into the Richmond community.⁵⁸ By suggesting the forgetting of ceremony, Hancock illustrates how the performances of survival undertaken by patrons of the Richmond Theatre significantly disrupted their common humanity. Hancock moved for the windows, using his sword cane to vault himself on top of the crowd, "providentially" reaching a window.⁵⁹ As Hancock tried to slip himself out, the sash came down and trapped his foot. The crowd behind him, terrified, began to climb over top of him, exiting over the topside of the window. He thought he was done for: "I gave myself up as lost...the flame, however rushed over my head, and the introduction of fresh air at the bottom of the window, gave me new life."⁶⁰ Hancock managed to extricate himself,

reinvigorated by the sudden blast of air, and half-jumped, half-fell through the window to the ground below.

Lynch fought against the rushing sea of humanity to return to the box in time to see the flames flash from one end of the theatre to the other, rushing “with the rapidity of lightning from the stage, along the facing of the upper boxes, taking both sides at the same time...”⁶¹ As the fire found greater and more abundant sources of fuel — the resin-coated pine board ceiling, the canvas painted box front coverings — the thick black smoke began to permeate the hallways, suffocating people. Lynch was able to make his way to the window, where he saw Hancock trapped. Not wanting to continue the inhumane climbing over of Hancock, Lynch, “undetermined” was “pushed away towards the west wall of the theatre...suffocation threatened...my hair caught fire...hope deserted me.”⁶² In a last desperate act of salvation, Lynch bolted toward the window, waving his hands over his head, hoping to fan away smoke and flames that licked at his scalp, even as bodies dropped to the ground around him. Lynch reached the window, heard an enormous crash behind him, and threw himself out towards the street.⁶³

Outside the theatre was Gilbert Hunt, an enslaved blacksmith in the city who had been sent to the theatre by his owners upon news of the conflagration with the directive to save Louisa Mayo, daughter to George and Elizabeth.⁶⁴ Hunt was a man with a broad, powerful body, wrought from years of brutal ironworking, and when he arrived to the scene, his strength served him well. He ran to nearby houses looking to borrow a mattress onto which survivors might jump but, finding none, returned to the scene only to find a similarly well-built man, Dr. James D. McCaw — “a man who might have been chosen by a sculptor for a model of Hercules” — had fought his way to a window, smashed it out, and climbed inside.⁶⁵

McCaw had been indentured to John Bell of Edinburgh, the famous surgeon and lecturer who revolutionized vascular surgery, and upon his return to Richmond set up a busy medical practice.⁶⁶ Seeing Hunt, McCaw began to pass women out the window, lowering them by their wrists into the slave's waiting arms. Six times he did this, with the final woman he passed out being his sister. As McCaw prepared to jump, Hunt noticed the wall of the building was beginning to totter, weakened by flame. As he jumped, McCaw's leather gaiter was caught upon a hinge. He hung precipitously by his foot, and, when the gaiter finally gave way, McCaw crashed hard upon the ground, shattering his femur, tearing muscles from bone, his skin blackened horribly by fire. McCaw told Hunt to drag him towards the near-by Baptist Church and, once there, was able to fashion planks from a fence into a splint. He would never walk comfortably again.

Thomas Ritchie, editor of the *Richmond Enquirer*, was also present at the theatre, and reported "the stairways were immediately blocked up — the throng was so great that many were raised several feet over the heads of the rest."⁶⁷ This horrible decision probably caused numerous suffocations as people were lifted directly into the thick smoke, creating great dead weight on top of the already panicked, choking crowd. Underfoot, many bodies were being trampled, skulls crushed and bones snapped, as great numbers of people tried to exit through a hallway not wide enough to fit more than a person and a half. The panic and trampling was bad, but the greatest horror came when the stairway, sagging under the weight of dozens, collapsed. John George Jackson, a delegate from Harrison County in town for the Virginia Legislative season, had waited when the cry of fire went up, perhaps thinking it a false alarm, or perhaps hoping to give the obviously crowded box seats a chance to clear out before he attempted his exit.⁶⁸ By the time he did make his attempt, the hallways were generally clear, and he was able to get half the

distance to the stairs, when he came upon Mary Scott, wife of Fairfax delegate Richard Scott and, with her, had already begun to cover the remaining distance to when they heard the call of “false alarm.” Jackson retreated back towards one of the boxes to see “the scenery in full blaze and the canopy on fire,” emitting a “very vivid...light.”⁶⁹

Jackson tried crowd control, not wishing to put too much physical pressure upon the audience of “chiefly Ladies” who were “greatly alarmed and cry for relief.”⁷⁰ Jackson believed that the fire was behind them and contained within the theatre, but he “found my hopes were illusive - a black thick smoke rushed upon us, so instantaneously suffocating, that those who had yielded to their fears by crying, sunk without a groan.”⁷¹ With asphyxiated bodies dropping unconscious or dead around him, Jackson was able to advance forward by the moonlight pouring in through some windows. He was staunch in his attempt to escape by a mass of bodies with the same idea, and Jackson must have, instead, headed back towards the stairs, reaching at least the first few steps when the smoke overtook him, later reporting that the smoke was “so intolerable that I could only make one convulsive struggle to advance and then I sunk senseless.”⁷²

Jackson reports the last thing he can recall was “my feet were descending.”⁷³ The poorly designed, narrow staircases were not built to withstand the force and weight of several hundred bodies at once, and, weakened by flame, they gave way with a horrible groan, removing the only source of “safe” exit from the second level of seating, and strewing bodies about the bottom floor of the theatre. Jackson, miraculously alive, managed to lift himself up, and immediately tried to help a woman exit along with him.⁷⁴ The scene was carnage: thick black smoke and flame surrounded him as people, bereft of a staircase and finding the windows too crowded for a timely exit, began to jump from the box seats into the pit, landing with sickening thuds, cracks, and

crunches. Jackson didn't hesitate and, feeling a blast of fresh air, followed it to find the exit. As he left, fire was beginning to blast out of the front windows, and, within a few steps, the roof caved in. He must have been one of the last to escape the inferno. In ten minutes, more than seventy people had died violently, and Richmond, Virginia became the sight of America's first great urban disaster — “a calamity unknown in the annals of our country,” — and fertile ground for the construction of memory-work by competing groups of actors.⁷⁵

We Parted in Silence; We Parted by Night

Although many of the accounts of the fire corroborate each other, there are a handful of accounts that stick out for their bizarre inconsistencies. This section will evaluate one such example of reality bending in the archive in order to illustrate the allure of mythologizing disaster events, and how the post-disaster paradigm creates a system in which cultural production focused on grief gives way to the production of what I term traumatic mythology, formed from a desperate need to construct understanding where there is none to be had. This process is similar in origin and effect to the burial of the dead, and to Richmond's legislation against public performances insofar as it appears to be a regular phenomenon in each of the post-disaster paradigms of these three theatre fires. These examples illustrate the significant ritual value in institutional responses while doing little to respond to the true danger: a treatment of the symptoms, but not the underlying cause of abiding poorly constructed theatre firetraps. This precipitates the slippage of memory into history through the loss of its “social and unviolated nature,” as memory is violated by post-disaster traumatic coping mechanisms meant to find meaning in carnage and destruction and death.

By reading a contemporary understanding of cultural production in post-disaster event paradigms, some of the traumatic mythologizing that mark theatre fires can be studied through a

symbolic interactionist perspective that recognizes their importance not because of their relationship to historical truth, but because of their status as artifacts of cultural production with direct relation to disaster and to the negotiation of memory. In the gulf between civic engagement, and the personal need to handle the stresses of trauma, urban rumors and myths provide a way to identify the socioemotional trauma that marked community members long after the flames had died down. While this is by no means the only strategy for constructing understanding — the next chapter addresses the extremely influential and fiery rhetoric espoused in the pulpits around the country towards the theatre a considerably more successful strategy — this section concerns itself with a narrative description that simply does not fit in with the rest of the evidence, but still persists through the power of myth. I undertake this analysis to suggest how and why urban myths evolve and spread, and how these myths contribute significantly to developing an understanding of disrupted social life in the post-disaster paradigm.

The most pervasive myth of the Richmond Theatre fire concerns the young and beautiful Sally Conyers and the war hero James Gibbon, Jr.⁷⁶ There is relatively little information about precisely what happened during the fire, but the most direct, first-person account comes from John Lynch, a merchant in Richmond, and friend to both Gibbon and Conyers. According to Lynch's narrative, provided directly after the disaster, when the fire began to spread, Sally Conyers fainted in the box before them. Lynch and Gibbon reached over and grabbed her, hoisted her up, and prepared to exit the theatre. Meanwhile, Caroline Homassel seemed more interested in the men fighting to rescue her than in the immediate danger presented by the fire: "a quarrel ensued between [Thornton] and a friend of mine, of long standing, Charles Hay, which should save me, and all was fire, flame, smoke and confusion...I was borne along by [Thornton] to a window..."⁷⁷ Conyers' head slumped against Lynch's left arm as he and Gibbon

dragged her towards the stairs. She appeared dead, and Gibbon told Lynch to go back and rescue someone else. “I am strong enough to carry her, she is light, and you can save somebody else.”⁷⁸ Lynch acquiesced, pointed Gibbon to the stairs, and began his return to the boxes, looking for someone else to help to safety. It was the last time anyone would see Gibbon or Conyers alive. Lynch, meanwhile, would next be seen offering aid to Hancock, who was hanging from a window. This is generally accepted to be the “official” story of Gibbon and Conyers. However, some years after the fire, another version of the Gibbon/Conyers story emerged, one that has since gained cultural purchase on the event, and is based primarily on two sources: Mary Gibbon Carter’s diary, and a newspaper story written by Susan Archer Weiss that allegedly recounts a fateful meeting between Weiss and an elderly Carter in a Richmond lodge years after the fire.

Carter’s diary, and Weiss’ article, have exerted tremendous influence over a popular understanding of the events of the fire, and simultaneously succeeds in constructing a kind of spooky logic behind the event. This influence holds in spite of the fact that there is no hard evidence for the story about Gibbon and Conyers the diary recounted; in fact, the only evidence still available of the contents of the diary is through the citations of newspapers, in particular a 1937 article in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* that notes the diary was “preserved by [Mary Gibbon’s] great-granddaughter Mrs. Louis Minigerode of Richmond.”⁷⁹ There have been few, if any at all, references made to the diary beyond that.

Susan Weiss’s article, reprinted in the *Richmond Dispatch* in 1899, presents a narrative that is functionally identical to what would later reported by the *Times-Dispatch*, though with considerably more narrative framing. The contents of Weiss’ article form a much more thrilling story about Gibbon and Conyers, and seems to be the primary source of the super-heroic actions ascribed to Gibbon that night. However, even a slightly skeptical reading of the article confirms

the incredibly problematic account put forth, which I will recount here. Given that, the story illustrates how a theatrical construction of the disaster process yields fictional cultural production that may gain powerful purchase in the historical and narrative reconstruction of the disaster event.

“Would you like to hear a story,” the elder Carter asks the young Weiss.

“A true story?”

“A true story of the old times of which I have been speaking, and the people and events which I remember. A sad story, but which it sometimes does me good to tell.”⁸⁰

In the article, Susan Archer Weiss recounts meeting “thirty years ago...an old lady with soft, white hair and delicate hands” who reveals herself as Mary Gibbon Carter, and who informs Weiss that they are, at that moment in the Mayo family house.⁸¹ Weiss begins the article with an invocation of death that overhangs the rest of the piece, effectively foreshadowing the themes and events she will describe, as Carter first references her famous father, reading from an entry in the *American Almanac for 1835*: “Died on July 1st, at Richmond, Va., in his seventy-seventh year, Major JAMES GIBBON.”⁸² While this invocation of death may suit the thematic needs of the story, it’s problematic because, first, no obituary appears in the 1835 *American Almanac*; Gibbon’s death is reported in the 1836 edition, the almanacs being usually published at the *beginning* of the year, as opposed to the end of it.⁸³ While this might seem like petty squabbling over dates, I argue that, if themes of death and loss frame the following narrative, it can also be read through a framing theme of a theatrical response to the horrible reality of the disaster, and should be understood not as hard fact of the event, but as a fictional device that opens up avenues of understanding the traumatic loss of life at the Richmond Theatre.

Carter describes to Weiss the beauty of Sally Conyers:

She had an almost Grecian profile, with clear, creamy complexion, and those soft, liquid brown eyes, which the French call velours. I never saw eyes so expressive, sometimes arch and laughing, then dreamy and sad. Her figure was slender and perfect, and she carried herself with an easy grace, her head well poised, and shoulders back - a beauty which few women possess. She seemed to care little for admiration, though always sweet and winning, and was a favorite with young and old alike...her first appearance [in Richmond] took all hearts by storm. "La Belle Conyers" she was called, and there was no end to the poems and epigrams addressed to her, according to the fashion of the day.⁸⁴

The poetry is, in fact, true. Following the fire, numerous poems were published in the *Richmond Enquirer* about the tragedy and beauty of the young Southern belle. Carter goes on to describe to Weiss how Gibbon and Conyers first met at a dinner party the night in November 1811 he returned from his military duty in Norfolk:

"Mary," he asked, "who is the young lady by the window in white with roses in her hair?"

I replied: "Miss Conyers, niece of Mrs. Gallego. Is she not lovely?"

"Lovely," he answered quietly ...with such evident admiration that I said laughingly:

"Take care, brother, or you, too, will become a victim. People say that Sally Conyers has no heart."

"How can any one look at her and say that?" he replied. And Mr. Professor Maxwell, of William and Mary, who was standing by, remarked:

"She is the sleeping beauty, but she will waken when the right knight comes."

Just then Miss Conyers turned, and her eyes and James's met. I saw a faint blush tinge her cheek and she looked down and trifled with her fan. In memory I can still behold her as she appeared at that moment, with her graceful attitude and her delicate profile turned toward us. She wore a dress of Indian muslin embroidered to the knee and edged with a narrow flunk, a narrow, white satin ribbon sash, ruby necklace and bracelets, and crimson roses in her dark-brown hair. The dress was made very low, according other fashion, but she wore a scarf of delicate lace slightly crossed over her bosom and fastened with a rose, for she was as modest as she was lovely.

Later in the evening I saw my brother and Miss Conyers dancing together, and everybody, even the old Chief Justice, was admiring them and declaring that they had never seen a handsomer couple.

Some people deny that there is such a thing as love at first sight. But my conviction is that by some mysterious influence which may possibly be called destiny these two loved each other from the moment in which their eyes first met. I think it was so with Miss Conyers, and I know it was so with James.⁸⁵

Note that Carter foreshadows Gibbon's impending status as "a victim" due to his love for Conyers, and the construction of Conyers as simultaneously a heartless villain and a princess waiting to be saved. Note also, despite the fact that Homassel reported that Conyers had

“numerous lovers,” Carter instead argues that Conyers was “as modest as she was lovely.” The invocation of the mysterious force of destiny coloring their meeting and time together is notable for the way it abides by the religious construction of the disaster as an act of God, an argument put forth in considerable detail in the following chapter.

Significantly, the quoted passage says nothing of the fact that the existence of letters between Gibbon, Sr. and James, dated August 1807, make specific reference to Conyers, implying that Gibbon and Conyers would have known each other well before November of 1811. One letter, written in late August 1807, while James was serving with the Navy in Norfolk, was donated to the University of Virginia’s Alderman Library by Miss Lillian S. Carter in 1948, and feature Colonel Gibbon mentioning “Miss C” to his son. An accompanying letter from Lillian Carter bears the enticing note that, “Miss C was Miss Sally Conyers of South Carolina...became engaged to Liet. G. The 26 Dec.: 1811.”⁸⁶ While the particulars of what Major Gibbon was writing to his son are unclear, owing to the significant degradation of quality of the letter from photocopying, what is clear is that the Gibbon family, and James by extension, were, at the very least, already familiar with Conyers in 1807, years before Weiss’ story suggests they initially met.

Nearing Christmas, Gibbon was given the order to return to his military service in Norfolk on the 27th of December, and his family had him sit for a portrait on Christmas day. “We remarked,” Carter recounts, “that in giving the finishing touches the artist, Mr. Sully, unintentionally changed the former expression and caught something of that tender sadness which naturally enough marked his countenance at this time, on the eve of parting with all whom he loved.”⁸⁷ Again, the sly invocation of death and departing marks this passage — James is returning to the dangers of active military duty, particularly dangerous given the tensions

prevalent in young America preceding the War of 1812 — suggesting a premonition of the doom to come by the young Lieutenant.

Carter called that social season “the gayest winter Richmond had ever known,” and that, because of the carousing, “a fanatical Methodist preacher compared the city to Sodom and Gomorrah, and predicted for its gay and sinful inhabitants a speedy and terrible punishment.”⁸⁸ Again, if the foreshadowing of “a speedy and terrible punishment” for Richmonders by “a fanatical Methodist preacher” seems narratively convenient, that’s because it probably is; in truth, behind the pulpit, preachers were often prophesying citywide destruction, this particular season’s carousing aside, and such rhetoric would have been pointed in late 1811, given that the appearance of the Comet of 1811 that fall, still streaking across the night sky, the recent New Madrid earthquakes, and the political issues that were leading up to the War of 1812 were all constructed as late-year portents of doom to come.

Weiss also recounts, according to Carter, a popular urban legend involving Richmond native Edgar Allan Poe, and his familial relationship to the Richmond Theatre. Carter notes that “Mr. And Mrs. Poe had belonged to” the “fine company of players in Richmond,” but that “Mr. Poe had just died in Norfolk...” while his wife lay ill in Richmond. The truth about Edgar Allan Poe’s father is a complicated one, and while it may have been true that his father had just died in Norfolk — although it is worth noting that it is only Weiss who makes that claim — David Poe, Jr. was hardly a factor in his children’s lives after he abandoned the family in 1809, and certainly was no longer working with the Placide and Green Company by 1811. Eliza Poe, however, did work with the Placide and Green Company that season, and her death was, at the time, a recent development. Soon after their arrival in Richmond, Poe, a “chief ornament” of the Placide and Green Company, began to show signs of tuberculosis; on December 8th, she died. She left her

children to various friends and family members, and the well-known Richmond family of John and Frances Allan adopted little Edgar, just shy of three years old. A theatrical benefit was held for her at the Richmond Theatre just days later.

Further historical inaccuracies show up. Weiss writes, “on Christmas-Eve the theatre managers announced the play of ‘Hamlet’ for the day after Christmas with the after-piece of ‘The Bleeding Nun.’”⁸⁹ This problematically ignores the fact that the theatre was supposed to remain dark on the 26th of December, as the company had originally intended to leave Richmond after the 23rd, and was forced to stay longer in the city when their newly contracted player, George Frederick Cooke, failed to join up with them in Richmond. It also misidentifies the performances that were scheduled to take place: *Hamlet* was never on the docket for that time period in the Placide and Green Company’s repertoire, and what occurred in the Richmond Theatre on the 26th was Diderot’s *The Father*, followed by *The Bleeding Nun*, both shows which were scheduled for the 23rd.

Carter then recounts a popular past time for Richmond’s young adults. The inclusion of this activity continues to subtly invoke the supernatural narrative tropes that would come to dominate memory work about the fire:

Some of the young people went around in the disguise of old-time mummers and fortune-tellers, which occasioned much amusement. But when they would have told Sally Conyers’s fortune with cards she shrank from it with an almost superstitious dread, saying that she had always had a horror of having her fortune told even in jest.⁹⁰

Of course, whether Conyers did maintain a “superstitious dread” of having her fortune told is almost impossible to prove one way or the other, but it’s worth remarking that her “refusal,” according to this story, only has any meaning *because* of the fire. If Conyers’s dread was, indeed, real, and the fire never occurred, this refusal never would have been worth noting; it has meaning only because it points to the notion of the predestined nature of the tragedy in an ironic and

discomforting way; the predestination of the tragedy was a common narrative tool of religious responses to the fire.

Carter describes the families planning to gather together for dinner at The Hermitage on December 26th, the house of Colonel John Mayo:

At breakfast, James remarked that he would not be able to go, having important business to attend to. He appeared so restless and uneasy that my mother inquired if he were not well.

“You will all laugh at me,” he answered, “when I tell you that I have had a horrible dream. I could not have believed that a mere dream could so impress one.”

Mother said something about nightmares, and father remarked that sailors were proverbially superstitious, but that he would never have expected James of that weakness.⁹¹

When Elizabeth (another sister) and Mary beg him to recount his dream, he acquiesces, and Carter-via-Weiss provides this narrative:

He seemed, he said, to be standing before a closed door, about to enter, yet conscious of the presence of some vague lurking horror within. Something seemed urging him to keep back; but seeing the door slowly open he stepped in and found himself in in [sic] a great hall, dark and entirely empty. After advancing some steps he turned back, when he saw behind the door a face - a man's face - standing out of the gloom as if illuminated with a pale, lurid light, though all around was profound darkness. The eyes were intently fixed upon him, and he at once felt himself seized with an indescribable and overwhelming horror. He would have escaped, but the door closed in his face, shutting him in with that awful presence. Starting from his sleep, he found himself bathed in a cold perspiration and under the influence of a horror such as he had never before conceived of. He added: “I have had that dream before, though when and where I cannot recall. But it seems to haunt me.”⁹²

Note the recurring images in the dream, and how they serve as narratively satisfying symbols of the fire: closed doors, darkened great halls, and eerie lighting effects. Later, when Carter sees Gibbon with Conyers, she recounts that,

I heard my brother telling Sally that he would not be able to attend, and I fancied that she looked a little piqued, as well as disappointed. She seemed to consider the excuse insufficient, and that on this last day he should be willing to sacrifice everything of the sake of her society. She could not understand his imperativeness of duty above all other considerations.⁹³

Again, the word choices foreshadow the coming tragedy, specifically the use of the terms “sacrifice everything,” and the invocation of Gibbon’s time as a sailor: “duty above all other considerations.” Given where Carter’s narrative is going, these terms are loaded with irony and significance: it is an obvious foreshadowing that Gibbon, in his militaristic sense of duty, will sacrifice everything for Sally.

When, later, at the Mayo house for dinner, Conyers is asked to play a song for the assembled, she responds with a 1790 poem by Louisa MacCartney Crawford:

We parted in silence, we parted by night,/
 On the banks of that lonely river, /
 Where the flagrant lines their boughs united;/
 We met, and we parted forever!⁹⁴

Although Carter attributes only the first half of the first stanza to Conyers’s voice — “at the fourth line, her voice faltered” — it may be worth noting that the poem itself is a sad goodbye to those we love who have gone on.⁹⁵ Of particular interest is the second stanza:

We parted in silence, - our cheeks were wet/
 With the tears that were past controlling;/
 We vowed we would never, no, never forget, /
 And those vows at the time were consoling;/
 But those lips that echoed the sounds of mine/
 Are as cold as that lonely river’s;/
 And that eye, that beautiful spirit’s shrine, ’
 Has shrouded its fires forever...⁹⁶

The obvious imagery of the flame of a “beautiful spirit’s shine” being “shrouded forever” link together the themes of a lost love and death, both central themes underpinning the Gibbon/Conyers story. That the poem takes place “on the banks of that lonely river” only reinforces its narrative applicability to Richmond, which sits upon the James River.

Gibbon begged Conyers to stay with him, but Conyers, apparently upset with Gibbon’s refusal to attend the play, accepted the invitation of a young British soldier to attend the theatre at his side. Understatedly, Gibbon told Conyers he “did not want to deprive her of any pleasure,

at which her face flushed and her eyes filled with tears,” and made plans, instead, to stay at home with his father — this plot point made, apparently, without the memory that the elder Gibbon was, indeed, at the theatre that evening, as confirmed by numerous sources.⁹⁷ It was, then, with surprise when “*Hamlet*” ended, that Carter reported seeing her brother enter the box. “He stood by the door with folded arms until someone made room for him behind mother and Miss Conyers...Sally blushed and smiled when he bent over and spoke to her; but I saw that her heart was full, and that she could with difficulty restrain her tears.”⁹⁸

As the orchestra “commenced an overture to the performance of *The Bleeding Nun*” — apparently skipping the scheduled intermezzo performances advertised in various Richmond papers between *The Father* and *The Bleeding Nun* — Carter saw Gibbon lean over and whisper to his mother “look at that man in the pit — the one who is looking this way over Mr. Adams’s shoulder. That is the fact that I saw in my dream.” Apparently upset at this dream vision made reality, he told Conyers, “I am going out, but will wait for you outside.”⁹⁹ There is, of course, neither any evidence that Gibbon arrived at the theatre late that night, nor that Colonel Gibbon was absent. Lynch gives the account that both were in the box for the entirety of the evening, and that, far from Conyers standing and waiting for Gibbon to return to rescue her, it was Lynch and Gibbon that grabbed her and began to remove her from the building, until Gibbon told Lynch that he could handle saving her by himself, as recounted earlier in this article.¹⁰⁰

After Gibbon made his exit, Carter dispatches with her narrative of the beginning of the fire in the space of a few lines, and notes that when the group made their exit from the box, Sally “seemed not to hear or notice anyone. She was standing, very pale, gazing toward the door, and I knew that it was James for whom she was looking.”¹⁰¹ Exactly how Carter might have known it was James is a mystery, of course. Carter’s narrative addresses the violence of escaping the

theatre, and picks up again once all have made it safely outside, although no one knows where her brother or Sally have gone; James, her mother reports, left before the fire occurred, and Sally must have been saved by Colonel Botts and his wife.

Carter assumes that Gibbon “walked awhile on the Capitol Square, not far off, until he heard the alarm of fire,” and dashed back towards the theatre.¹⁰² It’s true that the Capitol Square was not far off —perhaps a quarter or a half of a mile away — but given the incredible speed with which the fire swept through the building, it’s difficult to accept Carter’s description of the events as even remotely possible. It is here that the super-heroic abilities ascribed to Gibbon truly take root; while we’ve already seen his powers of prescience, we now are treated to abilities like super-speed, indefatigable endurance, strength far beyond the ken of mortal men, and otherworldly dexterity, as if Gibbon were some kind of 1811 approximation of Spider-Man.

Even allowing for a contemporary world-class running speed — although how he could have done this while traversing through muddy, snowed-caked, roads is a mystery — it would have taken Gibbon around a minute to make the return trip to the theatre, by which time the exits would already have been packed and crowded with panicked, crushed bodies. Carter believes that Gibbon “[fought] his way like a madman through the crowd,” and “flung...off” those that tried to prevent him from re-entering the building in order to “made his way to the pit, and thence sailor-like climbed one of the pillars to the gallery floor, where he found [Conyers]...”¹⁰³ Carter notes that, the next morning, Gibbon and Conyers were discovered by her father, “locked in each other’s arms,” recognizable “only by the navy buttons and the gold-and-jet beads” the couple were wearing.¹⁰⁴

The presence of soothsayers, prophetic dreams, or mysterious premonitions of dread suffuse the mythologies of these fires; in the case of the Richmond blaze, Conyers’ refusal to

have her fortune told, and James Gibbon's nightmare illustrate the anxieties of knowing one's future. However, understood as a narrative device, these are opportunities to create tension through dramatic irony — *if only they had heeded the warnings!* A sermon given by the Reverend James Muir about the Richmond Theatre fire may offer the first temporal example of a supernatural feeling of dreadful premonition about the fire, and the similarities between this tale and the story of James Gibbon are numerous:

A young man of engaging manners, and tried courage, was deterred from attending the Theatre by a dream, that he had been assassinated in the Lobby: in his dream he felt all the agonies of death; he awoke in terror, determined to avoid the accursed spot, but his resolution was shaken by the keen ridicule with which his apprehensions were treated. In the course of the representation, an actor entered with a hatchet in his hand. It threw our youth into agony. "That is the man I saw in my dream." He rose to fly, but was severely rallied by his female friends. "Stay, you are going to the spot where you were assassinated, stay we will protect you." He did stay, and when the alarm was given, generously afforded his friends every aid, but perished on the very spot, pointed out in his dream. Was not his fate foreseen? Were not intimations thereof afforded to him? Who could foresee that fate, or afford the intimations but God who does in the armies of heaven, and among the inhabitant of the earth what he pleaseth?¹⁰⁵

Muir's sermon, published in early 1812, seems to provide the framework for Carter and Weiss' traumatic mythologizing, as well as sharing the peculiar quality of reporting knowledge which would otherwise be impossible to know: how did Carter know Gibbon walked to Capitol Square, or that Conyers, frozen, was mentally begging for Gibbon to rescue her? How could Muir know that the young man "perished on the very spot pointed out in his dream"? It is in the lack of details that these stories become problematically vague when used as historical evidence. Given the overarching similarities between the Muir sermon and the Weiss article, particularly as they interact with regards to prophetic dreams and feelings of dread, when considered against the evidence provided by John Lynch, it seems extremely likely to me that the superhero story Mary Gibbon Carter recounts in her diary, as filtered through Weiss' tendency to re-write the truth in her scholarship, was extrapolated from Muir's sermon and applied to James Gibbon's death.

Most damning to Weiss's account of all, though, is the note from medical doctor John P. Little's 1851 *History of Richmond*, reprinted in 1933 from original publications in the *Southern Literary Messenger*:

When the cry of fire rose, and the flames rushed out, he became perfectly cool and composed, and prepared to meet, and escape from, the danger, which, in uncertain expectation, had disturbed him. Leading one young lady, and followed by another, he had gained the door before the crowd rendered the passage impossible, and then returning to save Miss Conyers, perished with her in the crowd of sufferers...He had lost an arm in the war with Tripoli, and being thus crippled, was unable to render proper assistance to is [sic] charge.¹⁰⁶

Exactly what Little may have meant by noting that Gibbon "lost an arm" in the war with Tripoli is something of a mystery: to what extent was Gibbon rendered armless, and which arm did he lose? Still, that Gibbon was without the use of one of his arms greatly complicates his ability to "sailor-like climb one of the pillars to the gallery," as Carter-via-Weiss claims. Little's narrative exists somewhere between the evidence provided by Lynch, what was written by Weiss, and what was preached by Muir, illustrating exactly how powerful the falsified historical narrative had become after the fire. Gibbon, for as much of a hero as he was, was simply "unable to render proper assistance" to Conyers and, according to Little, probably was responsible in part for her death; if Gibbon had allowed Lynch to aid him in helping Conyers, perhaps the more able-bodied man would have been able to guide them to safety. In the end, Gibbon was a hero — just not the superhero his sister wanted him to be.

Weiss' article doubtless makes for a good story, but it also directly refutes several important pieces of evidence that, when considered, suggest that what Weiss and Carter tells of is nothing more than just a good story. What is remarkable about the narratives of the Richmond fire collected in the *Dispatch* and elsewhere is how well they reinforce each other. T. Joseph Scanlon argues that, in the conducting historical research of disasters, the constructed web of narratives that develops in the post-disaster event paradigm is always strongest when multiple

accounts independently verify the same events. Given Scanlon's insight, added to the fact that there is no other confirmation of Gibbon's super-heroics that evening, as well as the fact that Mary Gibbon Carter's diary record of the event has obvious problems of bias towards constructing her brother's memory as super-heroic, as well as the fact that Carter recounts events she could not possibly have known about, it is safe to dispatch her version of the story of Gibbon and Conyers' deaths as mostly fiction. That does not, however, mean that the story — or Weiss' reporting of it — is useless. The goal of Weiss's narrative, and Carter's diary, is to construct some meaning where the evidence otherwise offers none, to give sense to the tragic deaths of two beloved people, and to establish a sense of meaning and order in a disrupted society: theatricalized reality as a form of post-traumatic disaster processing.

The sociologist Kathy S. Stolley notes that urban legends “are a modern form of ancient folklore traditions” and that “just as ancient folklores taught moral lessons, urban legends also often provide cautionary warnings about modern society.”¹⁰⁷ Understood this way, the Gibbon/Conyers story may suggest numerous warnings: not taking love for granted, or paying heed to portents of danger. These morals reveal the anxiety Richmonders may have felt at the end of 1811, and may also serve as an example of Joseph Roach's concept of “surrogation” insofar as their production in the wake of a disastrous event illustrates “survivors attempt[ing] to fit satisfactory alternatives...into the cavities created by loss through death...”¹⁰⁸

While the stakes of locating traumatic mythologies in the archive and re-contextualizing their usefulness as historical evidence may seem negligible, I'd argue that it points to a larger problem that marks the post-disaster time period. In the disrupted, unsettled reality, various groups of actors struggle with each other to gain purchase on defining the narrative of the event and, by extension, how the event will be remembered. This is of particular importance in socially

shared disasters like theatre fires because there are always questions that arise in the civic investigation of the facts of the fire regarding the assignation of blame for the deaths of the victims. In *The Long Shadow of Disaster*, Celesta Koffman Bos, Susan Ullberg and Paul 't Hart identify the stakes of this question by wondering, “why are some mass catastrophes more or less ‘forgotten’...whereas others are so vividly remembered in monuments, commemorations and public discourse?”¹⁰⁹ They argue,

Our key claim is that the extent and nature of disaster remembrance is not solely a question of physical characteristics such as the number of casualties, nor the degree of social disturbance they cause at the time of their occurrence; instead it should be viewed as a product of a political encounter between grass-roots memory and the elite-level, political ‘processing’ of disasters.¹¹⁰

Disaster, in the case of theatre fires, extends beyond the physical and temporal limits of the theatre and into the fabric of reality in the surrounding city, disrupting and redefining time, place, and identity. Disaster also disrupts the thin line between truth and fiction; in each of the three fires that serve as my case studies, civic responses were immediate; official inquiries were set up to conduct interviews, to craft a narrative, to provide answer for the central questions following a disaster: why and how? Bos, Ullberg and 't Hart's argument suggests that these “elite-level” narratives may subvert grass-roots memory through the civic power and weight given to official lines of inquiry. These official narrative construction often exclude facts that do not fit into their paradigmatic explanation, and Bos, Ullberg and 't Hart point to the existence of memory-work artifacts that were created independently of any “elite-level” civic memorial performances. They write,

Affected communities and victim groups will engage in memory work as part of the post-traumatic coping process. They will construct shrines, conduct ceremonies, erect websites and others things designed to ‘work through’ their experiences, and in doing so they may also seek to obtain public attention, respect, and perhaps support for their plight...facts and interpretations about the past are put forward that are at odds with those put forward by the government.¹¹¹

Understood through the lens of disaster sociology, these archival narratives can be repositioned as not simply bizarre, fictional outliers, not as quirks of a hastily constructed historical record, but as vital contributory performances, undertaken in the post-disaster paradigm, towards re-establishing order in a disrupted society on a grass-roots level. The stories identify the tensions and ironies inherent in collecting and organizing material about a process of remembering that is defined in no small part by its subject matter: disasters disrupt. There is symmetry in the notion that the archival materials about these disasters should be equally as disrupted, and disruptive. As T. Joseph Scanlon remarks in *Rewriting a Living Legend*, “dramatic events inspire fiction, some of it autobiographical.”¹¹²

Part I, Chapter 3: The Disaster After the Disaster

Dispute and Negotiation

The impossible task facing the city of Richmond was immediately clear as the cold, cloudless night of December 26th gave way to brutal reality on the morning of December 27th. The disaster event had ended, the fire had died down, but Richmond was presented with a slew of new problems, the first among which was identifying those who had died. As Bos, Ullberg, and 't Hart write,

The “disaster after the disaster” is often every bit as intense, intractable, and potentially debilitating as the acute phase...it is often only after the acute threat has abated that the existential uncertainty generated by a disaster begins to show its full significance. Disasters tend to generate public anxiety and sometimes extraordinary levels of collective stress. Because of the high stakes and pressures involved, they are times to be remembered.¹¹³

The “disaster after the disaster” — what I have termed the post-disaster paradigm — does, indeed, represent a time to be remembered. However, more important than configuring the post-disaster paradigm as a time to remember is how memory work undertaken in the post-disaster paradigm performatively illustrates the new structures being created to resolve disaster's disruptive effects. In Richmond, the early memory-work was produced within a religious context. The immediate construction of religion as a memorial framework “set the stage” for how the disaster would come to be remembered long after the disaster process had ended. Further, the authors argue,

Memory work is not a self evident or value neutral activity. In fact, key questions that arise in the wake of a disaster — “what happened?”, “why?” and “how did we react?” — are likely to be a source of dispute and negotiation. We should therefore explore the “entangled process” of political remembrance a little more closely, with particular reference to the remembrance of disasters.¹¹⁴

The “disaster after the disaster” should be understood as a site in which various groups of social actors compete for narrative — and so, memorial — dominance and precedence.

Throughout this dissertation, the terms “elite-level” and “grass-roots” are used to refer to survivor communities as organized in two broad groups. For the purposes of explaining the essentially contested nature of memory-work in Richmond’s post-disaster paradigm, elite-level should be understood to refer to religious institutions, while grass-roots memory work should be understood to refer to the smaller, and less effective, survivor communities.

The purpose of this chapter, then, follows along from Bos, Ullberg, and ’t Hart’s insights, and attempts to evaluate how the post-disaster paradigm may be treated in a way that produces a shift in the processes of creating memory-work that reveal the disrupted social order of the Richmond community, how governmental forces legislate in the wake of disasters, how symbolic rituals of death are imbricated in the creation of new social identity, how individuals attempt to fit their particular narratives into an official description, and how the convergence of these numerous methods of memory work unsettle an accepted narrative of the fire constructed solely from archival evidence, as I attempted to do in the previous chapter. These processional shifts in memory-work can be understood only in historical retrospect, once a new social order has been established. This kind of retroactive continuity — a re-writing and re-organization of the material of history through the lens of the successful memorial gestures of, in the case of the Richmond Theatre fire, an elite-level process of religious memory-work — illustrates how vital the post-disaster paradigm is for producing culturally powerful narrational tropes that come to significantly define readings of the historical event. The methodological insight of broadening the scope of evidence to include cultural production about historical theatre fires shifts the reading and reconstruction of evidence from an historical/historiographical issue towards what Gary R. Webb calls “the popular culture of disaster.”¹¹⁵

Webb asks,

Is it possible for a single event to permanently alter social life? And, if so, how has that event changed things? Does everybody perceive those changes in the same way? Is there agreement or disagreement on the desirability of those changes? These questions point to an important, but not always appreciated, point about disasters - that they have a significant cultural dimension... following catastrophic events, survivors and responders...engage in a wide range of cultural production...new rituals are enacted to provide order and meaning to their lives, including those surrounding the handling of the dead. Makeshift memorials are created to allow survivors the opportunity to share their emotions and remember those they lost. And poems and songs are written in efforts to make sense of what happened.¹¹⁶

Thus, instead of simply recounting the narrative of the memory-work following the fire, this section considers how these performances of identity contributed to the construction of culture in Richmond in 1812 and beyond in order to demonstrate that what is produced by disaster is every bit as important as what is lost.

A Whole City Bathed in Tears

In the early morning light of December 27th, a young George Wyeth Munford and his friends heard the chatter of stories about the fire at the theatre, and made their way to the spot. Where the theatre once stood, they found “a few blackened walls remaining, cracked and crumbling by tremendous heat,” and saw “smoking, smoldering ruins, and men with rakes, shovels and spades upturning and removing from the immense pile of ashes, where the ill-fated staircases fell, the charred remains of the awful dead.”¹¹⁷ This section describes the immediate reactions to the fire in Richmond and beyond in order to illustrate the shared nature of grief and mourning as essentially social and performative processes. In Richmond, the investigations launched by the government, and the inability of the city to remove the bodies from the site of the theatre, complicated the successful re-ordering of society to move through the post-disaster paradigm towards a new normalcy. The cleanup was a days long process, as Richmonders tried to carefully extricate burned bodies from rubble and ash. Identifying the bodies was a difficult process, given the burned and consumed remains; many bodies could only be identified by

“trinkets,” jewelry, or other markers of identity that survived the blaze. Mostly, the dead were identified through their absence; Richmond Mayor Benjamin Tate sent out representatives to go door to door in each of Richmond’s three wards, and to the neighboring city of Manchester, inquiring with family members if anyone was missing.¹¹⁸

The confusion and horror lingered long after the blaze abated, and early responses to the event helped to define it as a moment of shared grief, effecting not just victims, but the entire city and, eventually, the nation. Newspaper editors reinforced this idea; the *American Standard* wrote that “a sad gloom pervades [Richmond], and every countenance is cast down to the earth.”¹¹⁹ Thomas Ritchie’s *Richmond Enquirer* carried the editorial remarks begging, “Reader! Excuse our feelings, for they are the feelings of a whole city.”¹²⁰ Meanwhile, Mayor Tate’s ordinance on December 27th noted “the city having been visited by a calamity...which has deprived us of our most valuable citizens, pervaded every family, and rendered our whole town one deep and gloomy scene of woe...”¹²¹

Richmond grieved together; the loss of one was a loss to all. “Within hours,” writes Jewel Spangler,

The dead...began a rhetorical transformation into “citizens” and the mourners into “fellow citizens” in everything from private correspondence to news coverage to government resolutions. An ostensibly private catastrophe became public business, and performances of community grief were orchestrated by the city government, with the city’s inhabitants playing key roles as well.¹²²

One consistency shared between different disaster events is their tendency to re-write the spatiotemporal context surrounding the event. The area immediately surrounding the site of the theatre was transformed from houses, shops, and churches into hospitals and morgues, the streets into the pathways of a funereal procession, clothing into markers of grief adorned by black crepe.

This phenomenon informs the construction of grief as shared and socially defined, as opposed to individualized. Anne Eyre reinforces this point, writing,

Grief is fundamentally a social process: many Westerners think of grieving as an individual action, and much of grief therapy is individual focused, Yet the mourning rituals of many societies are complex, elaborate, spread out over months or years, and generally require collective participation.¹²³

Understanding that the initial feelings of shared social grief stem from the disruption of normative social systems suggests that the emergence of ritualized behavior in the post-disaster paradigm lends itself to granting citizens a feeling of control and agency while facing enormous anxiety, collective stress, and uncertainty.¹²⁴ This ritualized behavior becomes, through repetition, a contributory part of establishing new systems of order in a disrupted social paradigm, what Joseph Roach identifies as performance standing in for “an elusive entity that it is not but that it must vainly aspire both to embody and to replace.”¹²⁵ Through repetition, these memorial performances become a part of “the invisible rituals of everyday life.”¹²⁶

By noon the day following the fire, the Common Council had empowered Dr. Adams, W. Hay, Mr. Ralston and Mr. Gamble to head up the collection of the bodies in order “to soothe and allay, as much as in them lies, the grief of the friends and relations of the deceased.”¹²⁷ Further, these men were to transport the bodies of the unidentifiable victims to public burying grounds, and to oversee the erecting of tombs and inscriptions “as to them may appear best calculated to record the melancholy and afflicting event.”¹²⁸ All stores were declared shut for forty-eight hours in a show of respect to the dead, and all public “show or spectacle, or... any public dancing assembly within this city” were strictly forbidden for the term of four months, at the risk of the somewhat ironic penalty of “six dollars and sixty-six cents for every hour the same shall be exhibited.”¹²⁹

Mayor Benjamin Tate, meanwhile, convened a meeting on the 27th at the Capitol building, no more than half a mile from the theatre, where it was decided that Wednesday, January 1st would be “a day of humiliation and prayer in consequence of the late melancholy event” and that it would simultaneously serve as the day of the funeral for the dead.¹³⁰ By Saturday, the 28th of December, Richmond’s Executive Committee, under the pen of William Robertson, the Clerk of the Common Council, had put forth the first official markers of mourning, writing,

We feel for the loss of those...worthy and meritorious citizens who fell a sacrifice to the flames, in the late conflagration of the Theatre; and that as a tribute of the very high respect which we entertain for...their memory, we will for the space of thirty days wear crape on our left arms.¹³¹

The Common Council ran into an immediate problem following their edict granting power to Adams, Hay, Ralston and Gamble to move the unidentified dead to a public burying ground:

On the 28th it was represented to the President and Council, that the remains of the devoted victims could not conveniently be removed to the public burial ground, wherefore it was ordered that the relics should all be interred in the place where they fell, and that the ground should be purchased and appropriated accordingly.¹³²

That is, the fire had made it impossible to remove the bodies because there was no way the bones could be separated from the ashes, and thus no way to ensure all of the remains were properly disposed. Instead, the city purchased the site of the theatre, and interred the bodies there, in what was called a “promiscuous ruin.”¹³³ The site of the theatre, already marked by the trauma of the fire, was further cemented as a site of socially shared trauma, because the disaster re-wrote the space from a site of learning and social gathering “into one of awful horror and desperation that beggars all description.”¹³⁴

The morbid promiscuity of the theatre’s ruination complicated the process of grief. Eyre writes, “the need to find, identify, name, and officially dispose of the dead is in part a symbolic activity, the mark of a civilized society that seeks through great effort to ensure individual treatment of each body.”¹³⁵ Absent the possibility of individual treatment of the dead, Richmond

struggled to move on from the disaster, and the horror of the event continued to suffuse the city. There was no symbolic reassurance to the Richmond community that the government could handle the challenges of the disaster, especially when the symbolic head of the Commonwealth, Governor George Smith, was one of the victims of the blaze. The anxiety and mourning about the fire extended well beyond Richmond and Virginia; resolutions were passed in both the Senate and the House of Representatives that its members would wear “crape on the left arm for one month, in terming of the condolence and sorrow” its members felt.¹³⁶

The Committee of Investigation of the fire adequately summed up the anxieties of the community when they published their report. Although they had been able to functionally reconstruct the events of the night, they were left with one major question.

Why, this fatality? Why have so many victims perished on this melancholy occasion? It cannot be said, that it was the combustibility of the building and the rapidity of the fire, great as they undoubtedly were, which altogether produced this mortality of the species — for we cannot believe, if large vomitoria had been erected of the passage of the crowd; if there has been doors enough to admit them, that more than one-tenth of an audience should have perished on the occasion. It was in the opinion of the committee that this ill construction of the Theatre itself, was principally its cause. How numerous were the occasions on which it had long before been said, as the crowd was slowly retiring at the end of a play, “Suppose the house were on fire, what should we do?” Yet we slept with too fatal security over the evil - we trusted and we are ruined.¹³⁷

In this passage, the Committee of Investigation implicates the Richmond community-at-large, and the government in particular, as contributing to the responsibility for the number of deaths, an example of how the pre-disaster society knowingly allowed a building already socially understood as dangerous to continue its operation. The building was poorly enough designed that numerous times before December 26th, people had remarked upon the danger of the space, yet no attempts were made to correct any of these oversights. This passage reveals that the theatre wasn’t a problem until it became a problem, and that, even though there was a pointed awareness of the potential dangers posed by the building, citizens and officials alike continued to attend

performances there. The “disaster after the disaster” provided an effective method of reconsidering the operation of history and its effect on society: if grief was shared amongst the citizens of Richmond, so, too, was responsibility. And if the government couldn’t protect its citizens, to whom would they turn?

Although the funeral had originally been planned for Wednesday, January 1st, evidence suggests it occurred on Sunday, January 5th.¹³⁸ The procession moved throughout the city to the houses of the victims, collecting the remains of the dead, from Edward Trent’s house, up the main street towards the bank, to Capitol Hill, and then to the site of the theatre itself.¹³⁹ The procession was led by the body of Elizabeth Patterson, behind whom were clergy members, ladies in carriages, the Common Council, Directors of the Bank, members of the Virginia Legislature, Court officials, and citizens following on foot and horseback.¹⁴⁰ At Capitol Hill, the funeral was joined by “the bearers of two large Mahogany boxes, in which were enclosed the ashes and relics of the deceased.”¹⁴¹

The whole scene defies description. A whole city bathed in tears! - - How awful the transition on this devoted spot! — A few days since, it was the theatre of joy and merriment — animated by the sound of music and the hum of a delighted multitude. It is not a funeral pyre! The receptacle of the relics of our friends! — And in short time a monument will stand upon it to point out where their ashes lay!¹⁴²

The transformative power of the disaster rewrote the layout of the city, the dimensions of its population and, as so often happens, reality itself. The theatre, sitting on a former site of knowledge, amusement and, finally, violence, was transformed by the disaster into a grave, a final resting spot for dozens of unidentifiable bodies of Richmond citizens, an interment spot pregnant with significance, a scar on the psyche of the city, significant for its inextricable association with death. Owing to the impossibility of separating the bodies from the ashes of the fire, the city was not allowed the opportunity to participate meaningfully in the performance of

memory that mark post-disaster paradigms, and though Richmond held a funeral for the dead, it must be understood, on some level, as a symbolically hollow affair.

Calamity Was Anticipated

Jonas Barish's language addressing anti-theatrical prejudice in the nineteenth-century provides a handy metaphor for understanding the power of religious narratives constructed and used in a post-disaster paradigmatic reconstruction of reality: "...suspicion of the stage and of actors continues to smoulder," he writes, "bursting out from time to time into sudden and disconcerting blaze."¹⁴³ Barish's analogy suggests that anti-theatrical prejudice is not unlike fire insofar as the danger it poses to theatre always lurks, unseen, beneath the surface, ready to "burst out from time to time into sudden and disconcerting blaze" with only a small spark. This section evaluates religious screeds about the Richmond Theatre fire to demonstrate the tensions between grass roots and elite-level memory-work. If, as has been established, the post-disaster paradigm presents an opportunity for social (re)construction and cultural production, we must accept that there are numerous on-going memory-works, and that these attempts may come into conflict with one another in ways that productively reveal the operations of memory-work relevant to the reordering of social norms.

In consideration of how the Richmond society responded to the fire, through social rituals and urban mythology, by paying attention to the rhetoric from behind the pulpit, I argue that the post-disaster paradigm presented an opportunity for a powerful religious construction of the event as evidence of God's distaste for theatre, and that this opportunism established the dominant mode of thinking about, and remembering the Richmond Theatre fire. That the Monumental Church that now stands on the spot of the theatre is, perhaps, proof enough of this narrative domination. However, the subtle methods through which religious institutions

constructed the disaster as inherently Godly, and then created subscription schemes to provide for the construction of the church help to deepen an understanding of the techniques of memory-work undertaken in the post-disaster paradigm by elite-level memorial processing. This section also serves as a touchstone for considerations of the shifting relationship between theatre and religion, evidenced by similar religious responses to Brooklyn and Chicago, illustrating a century long arc in which religion, and religious memory-work, dealt with the ever increasing popularity of theatre.

The December 28th proclamation declaring the impossibility of moving the victims from the scene of the fire further demanded that “the...Committee is hereby authorized and empowered to purchase of the proprietors thereof, as soon as may be possible, all the ground included within such walls,” and that “the Common-Hall of the City of Richmond hold the funds of the City pledged to defray the expenses of purchasing the said Area, and of the enclosure thereof,” giving power to the government to purchase and own the new burial ground.¹⁴⁴ The power of the disaster transformed the location from a theatre, to a funeral pyre, to a burial ground and, eventually, to a church. This tendency towards transformation is not merely a rhetorical device in the historical records, but illustrates the extent of the influence enjoyed by elite-level institutions in the post-disaster paradigm to define the space and, in doing so, to control the memory of the event. These early narrative constructions significantly influenced the construction of the evidence about the fire, and of how histories of the fire would be written.

”How awful the transition on this devoted spot!” one account wrote, “it is now a funeral pyre! The receptacle of the relics of our friends - and in a short time a monument will stand upon it to point out where their ashes lay!”¹⁴⁵ The Monument Committee, headed by John Marshall, began soliciting and accepting donations from Virginians and citizens all over the country in

order to defray the cost of purchasing the land and erecting an eventual monument. Marshall's involvement in the Monument Committee is vital for how it implies the importance of reading material about the development of the Monumental Church as existing at the intersections of law, memory, and religion. As the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, Marshall's contributions to the elite-level processing of the disaster inherently suggest that the "official" memory-work, which sought to reinscribe the site of the disaster as a Christian church, was both legally and morally correct.

Jewell Spangler argues, in *American Mourning: Catastrophe, Public Grief, and the Making of Civic Identity in the Early National South*, that the rhetoric of memorial writings on the Richmond theatre fire "evinced a shift toward a more inclusive notion of public mourning and American belonging," and that, "what stands out is the thoroughly apolitical nature of this moment of national grief. The Richmond victims were not (and could not have been) turned into martyrs for a national cause — there *was* no cause, except perhaps to improve safety standard in public buildings."¹⁴⁶ Spangler's reading of the memorial writing ignores the inherently political nature of the church — implied in part by Marshall's involvement — and the way in which the members of the clergy constructed their narratives about theatre in the post-disaster paradigm. These narrative constructions contributed significantly to the public's understanding of the event. There *absolutely* was a national cause for which the victims of the fire were turned into martyrs, lest their deaths would have been in vain: the Richmond Theatre fire demonstrated God's distaste for the theatrical, and numerous religious sermons specifically highlighted that point.

Behind their pulpits and through their publications, preachers tried to make sense of the event for their parishioners. James Muir's sermon suggests that God may have spoken to some of the victims through dreadful premonitions, a trope commonly evoked following a disaster:

The calamity was anticipated by some of the sufferers. I do not mean that any had an idea that the Theatre should that evening be their grave, but they were uneasy, they knew not why; and apprehended an unknown by fatal evil...God, in pity to men, gives secret intimations in a manner none can explain, of what he designs that man may prepare to meet their god...One very amiable, and had for many years past been solicitous to know and to serve her God, felt an unaccountable anxiety for the welfare of her husband, who was then absent. Nothing had occurred to excite anxiety, but it was excited, and in a degree that she was restless, until she had reached Richmond. Reluctantly she attended the theatre, at the importunity of her young friends, declaring that for the last time she would tread forbidden ground, and sacrifice her own judgment to the gratification of others. She effected her greater indeed, but so injured that in a few days she expired. The hand of God led her to the fatal spot, no doubt for wise reasons, which, for the present, are involved in impenetrable mystery.¹⁴⁷

The trope of premonitory feelings of disaster in Muir's writing suggest the poverty of thought associated with being closed off from the influence of the supernatural. Muir's sermon also invokes the dramatic trope of tragic irony when the Young Woman agreed to attend the theatre on that fatal night, but said it would be "the last time she would tread forbidden ground."¹⁴⁸ The obvious implication of Muir's insight points to a more easily explicable model of the disaster whereby the victim became a victim through faults of her own.

Ann Tuke Alexander's 1812 *Remarks on the Theatre* argues that the theatre blinded Christians from their beliefs, writing that theatre patrons might think, "surely from the place of amusement, sorrow and gloom must be banished for ever!"¹⁴⁹ However, Alexander writes, their thoughts would eventually turn to God:

In a little while, however, these enraptured beholders begin to give way to a different train of reflections. They first query within themselves, Can this gay company be composed only of professing Christians? Have those who are now acting their ludicrous part on the stage, and those who are entertained at the expense of their time and talents, been baptized in the name of Jesus? Have they vowed, or has it been promised for them, that they should "renounce the devil and all his works, the vain pomps and glory of this world, with all covetous desires of the same, and the carnal desires of the flesh, so that they will not follow nor be led by them?"¹⁵⁰

"Let these awful inquiries suffice to awaken the consciences of those, who have felt themselves *secure* within the walls of a play-house," Alexander writes.¹⁵¹ By suggesting that the

audience were “enraptured beholders,” Alexander positions spectacle as the primary contributory factor in theatre’s power to hold sway over audience members which, in turn, distracts the critical thinking abilities of those audience members to question the Godliness of the players onstage. In Alexander’s thought experiment, a critical observer would come to note that, any who give of their time to the stage could not have been baptized in Jesus’ name. In Alexander’s construction of audience members at the Richmond Theatre, they are following and being led by the vain pomps and glories of the world of the stage, by the covetous and carnal desires of the performers, and so are engaging in inherently anti-Christian behavior. The implication is that the audience, guilty of worshipping another God, deserves the fiery fate that awaits them.

Archibald Alexander (no relation) delivered a sermon in Philadelphia to the Medical Class of the University of Pennsylvania, on January 8th, 1812, in which he argues that a “morbid sensibility has, with many in this age, usurped the place, and claimed the honor, due to moral principle and religion,” and that “this morbid sensibility is related to the spectacle of suffering humanity,” which “will always excite our sensibility, unless the feelings be blunted by vicious indulgence, restrained by prejudice, or extinguished by the long prevalence of malignant passions.”¹⁵² In tying together the evil of “spectacle” with “suffering humanity,” Alexander first advances the argument about spectacle’s allure provided by Ann Alexander, and also subtly suggests that theatre — an arena defined in part by its relationship to spectacle — is guilty of creating the “morbid sensibility” in which exist “vicious indulgence” and “the longer prevalence of malignant passions.”

Examples of religiously themed doomsday rhetoric made use of some of the recent events occurring around the country. An unidentified author’s work collected in *Particular Account* writes,

O! How can the heart conceive, or tongue express the awful anguish created by such a death, but such a parting? None, but God and those who have survived the shock of the fire at Richmond! Tremendous as the shock of an earthquake, and by far more fatal than all the recent shocks which have been felt in our country, from Maine to Georgia: truly the judgments of God are abroad in the earth!¹⁵³

Such attempts invoked the shifting of the New Madrid fault lines as a natural phenomenon in order to tie a causal linkage between the events, implying that the fire was forewarned, but such warning were ignored. In some cases, the fire was evidence of God's distaste for theatrical performances, and proof of the Christian conception of the theatre as a source of social evil, as well as the originary point for socially disruptive practices. "No doubt," one such publication reads, "the present prevailing system of *Nudism* had its origin in the Playhouse, and in the person of a prostitute for a player: but who could have supposed that such a mode of dress, or rather, *undress*, would ever have been adopted by virtuous women?"¹⁵⁴ The same source asks,

Is there a loose, debauched, depraved ungodly man or woman, who, generally speaking, does not frequent the theatre? It is the resort of the most worthless characters in existence; it is properly the Flesh-market of the city; it is the temple in which the world's trinity reside and are adored — 'the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life.'¹⁵⁵

The invocation and perversion of the Trinity in the above passage illustrates the breaking of the First Commandment, denying the presence or worship of other gods over the Christian God, and suggests that the theatre was a social space of such worship through its tendency to promote a social spectacle of a site in which one could "see and be seen." Even the more evenly tempered responses took a critical approach to the position of theatre in society. William Hill's sermon, delivered in Winchester, Virginia, suggests that the fire was an opportunity to evaluate "a very vicious humor, which always raged in the world: that of censuring the faults of others, whilst we overlook our own."¹⁵⁶ Hill asks, "are we to conclude that [the victims] were the guilty, and we the innocent?," suggesting that, in the Divine practice of God, it may be possible to read moral righteousness, but that the pre-ordinance of the victims of Richmond does not imply either

guilt or innocence.¹⁵⁷ Still, even this relatively polite approach is problematized by Hill's clarification that,

While I sincerely commiserate the unhappy victims who have lately fallen at the theatre in Richmond...I am constrained to declare myself an enemy to the amusements of the theatre...not that I suppose a theatre might not be so ordered and regulated, as to become a powerful auxiliary to virtue, patriotism, and literature. I believe they formerly answered these purposes in ancient Greece and Rome...I view them, at present, as little better than schools of vice.¹⁵⁸

From a religious perspective, the fire offered an opportunity to demonize and vilify the theatre on a national level. This was no random confluence of similar ideology, but a coordinated, governmentally supported campaign. On the 29th of December, Nicholas Smethen, Chaplain to the House of Representatives, gave a sermon to a crowd at the U.S. Capitol Building, saying,

We sincerely wish that every minister of religion in the United States would, with pious zeal, embrace this opportunity, which the providence of the Almighty has put in his power, to call upon the people to seek that temper and practice of righteousness which exalteth a nation, and to forsake to crooked ways of sin, which are a dishonor to any people, especially to Americans who are so favored with civil and religious blessings.¹⁵⁹

Smethen may have been speaking in a subtle code, without direct reference to the institution of theatre, but the meaning was clear: the sinful wages of theatre were death. The religious construction of the disaster was Divine justice, an Act of God, a proper and fitting illustration of what fate awaited those who attended the theatre, a den of iniquity and sin. These and other religious sermons provided elite-level processing of the disaster event as a distinctly religious concern which, in turn, strongly influenced how the disaster would be remembered and, eventually, historicized. This influence is most strongly seen in the memorial constructed to the dead. The powerful sway reverends held on the imaginations of their congregations, as well as the specifically religious overtones of the rhetorical response to the fire,

Gave rise to the suggestion that besides the monument proposed by the Common Council, there should be erected by public subscription, on the ruins of the Theatre, an edifice to be set apart and consecrated for the worship of God.¹⁶⁰

On the ashes and bones of the theatre and its victims, Richmond would build a church.

Spangler's assertion that "what stands out is the thoroughly apolitical nature of this moment of national grief," holds little weight when one considers the wide-reaching influence religious responses had over the socially shared nature of the grief for the victims of the fire.¹⁶¹

Sociologically, the construction of the Church on the site of the former theatre is extremely significant: the remains of the victims were literally written over in service of the political cause of the church's anti-theatrical prejudice.

The plan evidently spoke to a need already felt in the city of Richmond for more church space, and the "Association for erecting a Church on Shockoe Hill" teamed up with the Monument Committee of the Common Council by that February:

Resolved, That the committee common Hall, in purchasing the whole of the said ground, (meaning the whole lot on which the Theatre stood,) and arrange with the said committee, appointed in pursuance of the fourth article, be authorized to unite with the committee of the most eligible plan on which to appropriate the ground so to be purchased to the joint purpose of erecting thereon both the monument and the church.

It is proposed and approved by the members of both the above committees, that forty feet square fronting on H street, and in the centre of the Theatre lot on that front, be reserved for the monument, to be enclosed by and under the direction of the committee of the Common Hall, and that the remainder of the ground be appropriate to the erection of a church, under the direction and control of the committee or agents of the above mentioned association...¹⁶²

By August, enough money had been raised so that the Church Association was able to engage Robert Mills to design and construct the building. Mills was an architect of enormous renown, a Charleston, South Carolina man who had transplanted to Philadelphia to study under Benjamin Henry Latrobe, and who had experience studying under Thomas Jefferson, as well.¹⁶³ On August 1st, Mills — known as the "first American architect" — directed the laying of the corner stone of the church.¹⁶⁴ By late March/early April of 1814, the sum of five thousand

dollars, collected via public subscription, was used to pay down the debt on the land on which the monument would stand.¹⁶⁵ The fact of the public subscription undertaken for funding the Church illustrates how religious screeds had successfully dominated the memory-work of the early post-disaster paradigm. Just a few weeks later, pews were sold to prominent members of the Richmond community.¹⁶⁶ By mid-1814, the Church was officially open for business.

Anne Eyre argues that “the importance of remembering the past is illustrated post-disaster in the erection and maintenance of permanent reminders of tragic events,” and that “such areas are ‘sacred’ spaces, that is to say they are set apart as being of special significance and regarded as worthy of particular respect.”¹⁶⁷ Further, Eyre argues, “permanent memorials may focus on the importance of looking forward as well as back to an event.”¹⁶⁸ Gary Webb notes, “the post-disaster time period is a contested terrain in which various groups (victims, the media, and public officials) attempt to make sense of the event. In some cases, there is agreement on what happened, and in other cases, there is conflict and disagreement.”¹⁶⁹ In the “contested terrain” of Richmond in the days and weeks following the fire — indeed, because disaster is boundless, it may be appropriate to formulate “contested terrain” on a national level — it is clear that religious forces controlled the narrative of constructing meaning and memory. This can be seen most clearly in the Monumental Church itself, of course; the Church literally surrogates the absent theatre, and the victims who died within that theatre. It can also be seen in the quick rush to perform symbolically meaningful rituals of entombing and sacralizing the dead. The powerful and incendiary rhetoric used by preachers constructed the theatre as a location of vice and evil, and God’s involvement in the destruction of the building, and in the deaths of the victims, as an act of justice against a house of iniquity. These rhetorical devices, understood as forms of elite-

level processing of the disaster event, performatively “set the stage” for the Richmond Theatre fire to be remembered.

Somewhat appropriately, the Monumental Church’s construction pays subtle homage to its location’s significance through the architectural style in which it was designed. Mills, perhaps referencing the proposed and designed, but rejected, theatrical complex designed by his teacher Latrobe in 1798, designed the church in the relatively rare architectural style of Greek Revival. While I doubt Mills was purposefully invoking theatre’s past, it’s difficult not to see, in the columns and porticos, in the rounded top-level seating, in the way the pulpit provides a *skene*-like backdrop to the main playing area, hints of Greek theatre design. The theatricality of the architecture of the Church suggests a link between the inherently theatrical nature of the disaster, and the memory-work undertaken by religious institutions in the post-disaster paradigm. In the fire, the Church saw not just a tragedy, but also an opportunity for creation, a chance to allow the “smouldering” suspicion of the stage and actors by religious forces the chance to “burst out...into sudden and disconcerting blaze,” and, through that blaze, forge a religious anti-theatrical narrative that would operate powerful influence on how the disaster was remembered.¹⁷⁰

Part I, Epilogue:

Monumental: From Richmond to Brooklyn

As I have argued throughout this chapter, the immediate and most powerful memory-work produced following the Richmond Theatre fire was located in elite-level religious institutional processing of the event as a form of divine justice. The historical recounting and analysis of historical material undertaken in this chapter models the remainder of the dissertation by suggesting that, in the disrupted existence of a post-disaster paradigmatic reorganization of society, narrative and memory are essentially contested through the struggle between elite-level and grass-roots social communities. The prevailing side of this power struggle produces significant material that contributes enormously to how the event will be written about and remembered. In Richmond, religious responses won the struggle, and the cultural and memorial material that was produced — most notably, the Monumental Church — tended to reinforce the value of the religious construction of the event.

If the initial sociological rhetoric of the Richmond Theatre fire was religiously incendiary, another, more subtle strain developed around the importance of never forgetting the event, lest it repeat, as evidenced by this passage from *Calamity at Richmond*: “the scene which ensued out of the house, was witnessed by many, and like that within, will long be remembered, but probably never adequately described.”¹⁷¹ There is, however, a problem with the religiously constructed narrative of God’s divine justice as the defining reason behind the Richmond Theatre fire, because such rhetoric implies the inherent moral righteousness of the event. “If an event is defined as unforeseeable or beyond human control,” Webb argues, “it is not likely that corrective measures will be taken to prevent future occurrences.”¹⁷² Because if the occurrence of the

disaster is beyond the ken of mortal men — if, indeed, it is God’s justice in action — then there is no need to remember, and, without memory, no ability to take corrective measures.

This point may answer a central question that develops when these three fires are considered side-by-side-by-side: if these events were important enough to merit specific calls for remembering, why did theatre fires keep “bursting out...into sudden and disconcerting blaze?”¹⁷³ It is obvious that no corrective measures were taken, or otherwise, that any corrective measures taken were effective only so long as their link to the victims remained significant and visible. But memory, like theatre, becomes itself through disappearance. In 1904, Arthur Hornblow, responding to the Iroquois disaster in Chicago, wrote, “the disaster is forgotten in a week, the theaters do as little as they can, gradually neglecting the most ordinary precautions, the public does not give the matter a thought, and everything goes on merrily as before unless a fresh horror occurs to teach us another lesson.”¹⁷⁴ If there is a “grotesque sameness” about these three theatre fires, it may best be articulated not in the disaster event itself, but in the post-disaster paradigmatic fading of the disaster’s social significance.

Memory is short, and because the elite-level institutional response successfully positioned the memory of the disaster as inherently divine, Webb’s insight carries particularly significant weight: “if an event is defined as unforeseeable or beyond human control, it is not likely that corrective measures will be taken to prevent future occurrences.”¹⁷⁵ In 1876, in Brooklyn, New York, this lack of corrective measures, the problematic nature of successfully institutionally processed memory and history, would prove a fertile environment for a “fresh horror” to occur on a clear, cold night in December, not unlike the night the Richmond Theatre burned down.

Part II, Introduction:

The Conflagration Era: Brooklyn, 1876

The second case study of this dissertation focuses on the Brooklyn Theatre fire in 1876. One challenge I experienced with researching and writing about Richmond was the absence of a digitally indexed source of information in the form of newspapers accounts of the event. While I was able to secure microform copies of the *Richmond Enquirer*, in the absence of an abundance of readily available reporting on the event, I relied heavily upon disaster books and religious sermons for use as evidence. The Brooklyn Fire was easier to research owing to the *New York Times*, *New York Tribune*, and *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* archives online. More abundant evidence made it possible to produce a more nuanced analysis that foregrounds the interpretive framework of traumatic transformation and production as marking the post-disaster paradigm. By this, I mean that the memorial and cultural material produced following the fire operated along themes of sociopersonal transformation as a productive response to the disaster. This is seen through the definitional performances related to the disaster in religious sermons, relief efforts provided by the Brooklyn Theatre Fire Relief Association (BTFRA), and how the disaster produced urban mythologies that articulated the importance of transformation, most notably around Steele MacKaye's attested contributions to the development of technologies of theatre safety owing to his alleged attendance at the theatre the night it burned down, and the disastrously significant re-writing of Kate Claxton's past and future.

By traumatic transformation, I mean a view of the Brooklyn Theatre fire that constructs the meaning of disaster as inherently related to sudden and violent social and physical change. Often, these changes are thought of only in the negative terms of destruction and death. Yet disaster sociologists recognize the important contributions disaster make to increase the prevalence of

performances of social solidarity, as well as the way a disaster event demands response from civic institutions to correct negligence and/or apathy in the public. While in Richmond, religious responses gained immediate and powerful purchase on the narrative of the event, and so dominated the modes of memorial production related to the event, the rhetoric espoused by clergy in relation to the Brooklyn fire was considerably more permissive of theatre's "sinful" nature, and focused primarily on encouraging citizens to live their lives as monuments to the dead. This illustrates what I mean when I use the terms traumatic transformation and production: memory-work created in the disrupted post-disaster paradigm that contains a significant link to the disaster as an originary event, which is specifically geared towards re-establishing social order.

I use these terms specifically in relation to the Brooklyn fire to play upon the productive relationship between elite-level and grass roots memory work that marks Brooklyn's post-disaster paradigm as unique amongst these three case studies. The attempt to read Brooklyn's fire through this concept of traumatic transformation stems from the developing rhetorical devices newspapers and other sources used in discussing the fire, many of which highlighted the inherent theatricality of the disaster, and of the responses to the disaster. More information also meant a much greater ability to track the development and spread of confabulations that use the Brooklyn blaze as originary, including the mythology that developed around Kate Claxton as a fire jinx. This kind of traumatic mythology will be understood to be, itself, a form of traumatic transformation.

The sociological force of contemporaneous events in the rest of the United States in the latter part of the 1800s may have contributed to the post-disaster paradigmatic construction of memory work through the notion of traumatic transformation. The narrative constructions used

in the evidence about 1876 Brooklyn Theatre fire shared significant similarities to traumatic transformations that were occurring in the country at large. These transformations were the result of sociopolitical tensions produced by the fallout of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and of the rapid urbanization and expansion of the U.S.A., constructed and often funded by industrial revolution.

The industrial revolution played a major contributory role in the what Scott G. Knowles terms “the Conflagration Era,” a time in which the urban population and infrastructural density of cities made for “an unprecedented crucible for disasters,” in which “modern urbanization itself emerg[ed] as a process marked by fires, floods, and the imminent risks inherent in new and untested meetings of people, material and environment,” producing “a dialectic of trial and error tremendously productive of new disaster knowledge.”¹ Knowles’ insight further supports my use of traumatic transformation as a perspective through which to understand memorial production of Brooklyn Theatre fire: disaster processes generate opportunities for change and transformation, and elite-level and grass-roots processing of the Brooklyn Theatre fire made use of the rhetoric of transformation embedded within the process of modern urbanization. According to Knowles, cities in the Conflagration Era, like performance and disaster, became themselves through disappearance.

The cultural context of America at the end of 1876 greatly contributed to the disruptive power of the fire at the Brooklyn Theatre. Independent of such an historical context, the Brooklyn blaze would still be considered a destructive and significant fire in theatre’s history. However, the extent to which the fire caused social disruption was greatly magnified by a country already struggling with issues of identity and loss, a cultural *milieu* already disrupted by serious and contentious political and economic instability, a country barely a century old that

was in a state of perpetual transformation. If the political and social climate in Richmond in 1811 was tense, then 1876 was a powder keg. Struggling in the middle of the Long Depression, the country was also contending with the scars of the Civil War, and a contentious Presidential election cycle between the Republican Rutherford Hayes and the Democrat Samuel J. Tilden. The election was still undecided by December, while riots broke out in South Carolina following the gubernatorial election in that state.

The Long Depression was caused by a multitude of factors, but most notably the Panic of 1873 when the post Civil War economic boom slowed, and the railroad industry, having enjoyed unprecedented private and public support, failed to show returns on its investments. Most notable was the failure of Jay Cooke's eponymous bank to successfully market its enormous investment in the Northwestern Pacific Railroad to buyers. Cooke's Bank ended up owing approximately 80% of the project, and when these liabilities became public, people began removing their money from the bank, and the company failed, causing widespread panic in the American banking system. As this economic panic rippled outward, other cities struggled to maintain their infrastructure as well; notable among those cities were Chicago, which, only two years prior to the Panic of 1873, had suffered enormous property loss in the Great Chicago Fire, and Boston, which, in 1872, had suffered a similarly destructive citywide conflagration.²

The Presidential election between Rutherford and Tilden was controversial, equaled only, perhaps, by the widespread corruption in the office of sitting President Ulysses S. Grant, including the 1869 Black Friday gold panic, and the 1875 Whiskey Ring, which had damaged American trust in the office. Both candidates —Rutherford and Tilden — ran on a platform of reform, and each began immediately attacking the other: Rutherford argued that Tilden's Democrats were responsible for the bloodshed of the Civil War, while Tilden suggested

Rutherford's Republicans were morally bankrupt. This political theatre came to a head on Election Day, when Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina returned their electoral votes for Tilden. These returns, however, were marked with reports of violent threats being made against Republican voters among other controversies, and though Tilden had the popular vote, as well as a majority of the Electoral vote, the status of who had won the Presidential election remained undecided until the Compromise of 1877.³

Set against the backdrop of these national tensions, Shook and Palmer launched their 1876 season on October 9th, with Clara Morris performing in A.E. Lancaster and Julian Magnus' *Conscience*, a remount of the same production at Union Square. By early November, the theatre was advertising Lawrence Barret and Edwin Davenport as the stars of a production of *Julius Caesar*, alongside advertisements for the forthcoming *Two Orphans*, set to debut December 4th, and scheduled to feature "all the magnificent Union Square Theatre Scenery."⁴

Part II, Chapter 4: Memorably Disastrous

Most Liberal and Most Enterprising

In its very short history, from its opening in 1871 to the Brooklyn Building Association awarding the theatre to Shook and Palmer, the Brooklyn theatre space was marked by themes of transformation: as an enterprise, the building was an attempt to transform the theatrical landscape of New York by establishing a theatre in Brooklyn that could rival the first-rate artistic and financial success of Broadway. In order to establish this kind of success, the Conways, the original proprietors of the theatre, instituted a platform of almost daily transformations of productions, loading in and loading out shows with incredible frequency. Finally, the site transformed again as it passed from the hands of the Conways, to their daughters, to the Brooklyn Building Association (BBA), to Shook and Palmer. This chapter traces the history of the Brooklyn Theatre, and of the people who were most closely associated with the construction, management, and production practice at the theatre, and of the production of *Two Orphans* that was running on December 5th, 1876 in order to illustrate how themes of transformation were already imbricated within the organization of life in pre-disaster Brooklyn.

The numerous political and social stresses wrought by the industrial revolution constructed the USA as a nation in flux, illustrated by the contentious Presidential election cycle, the South Carolina gubernatorial election riots, the rapid spread and collapse of the railroad industry, and the subsequent banking collapse. The industrial revolution was a form of reflexive modernization, a series of national growing pains in which the development of new technologies simultaneously created greatly enriched environments for disaster. The nation transformed, sometimes traumatically. The Brooklyn Theatre fire may be positioned as a microcosm of those stresses; Scott G. Knowles writes,

Disasters are not external in some magical way to the realities of the human-shaped environment or political culture in which they occur. In fact, it is probably best understood the other way around. In the patterns of property destruction, in the communities damaged and those protected, in the technologies and policies available to limit or avoid them, a disaster mirrors the prevailing values of the society in which it occurs.⁵

Primarily, by illustrating this history, I hope to demonstrate how transformation was a theme that was always already embedded within the Brooklyn Theatre via the numerous changes in management, production style, and its shifting relationship to New York City, in order to argue for transformation as a way to analyze and understand cultural production in the post-disaster paradigm.

The theatre was built in 1871 in Brooklyn, a city that bore the nickname “City of Churches.” Richmond in 1811 was a city bereft of Churches, and when the fire occurred at the Richmond Theatre, preachers identified an opportunity to construct the disaster as a form of divine justice, which, in turn, contributed to the memorial production of the Monumental Church. The nickname “City of Churches” would also forecast how the Brooklyn Theatre fire would be memorialized. The spatial significance of the theatre and the multitudinous presence of churches cannot be underestimated; in the post-disaster paradigm, preachers from around the City of Churches contributed significantly to defining the fire as an opportunity for inward reflection and outward, positive sociopersonal transformation through their funereal speeches, a point I take up in more detail in Chapter 6.

The structure was erected for Frederick and Sarah Conway, actors and spouses, and originally bore their name. Sarah, born Sarah Crocker in Connecticut in 1834, made her debut at the National Theatre in New York in 1849, and met and married the British expatriate Frederick Bartlett Conway during their mutual engagement at the Broadway Theatre a handful of years later. Conway, son of famous British actor William Conway, had made a name for himself

playing opposite Edwin Forrest, but was also noted for his versatility; he could transform through serious, dramatic roles to light, comedic roles with panache. Conway struck a figure that was described as “thoroughly English,” with a “stout, well-knit figure, not over tall...light hair, blue eyes, prominent features, and rich complexion” and was quickly a favorite of the Broadway stage following his 1850 debut as Charles Surface in Richard Sheridan’s *School for Scandal*.⁶ Perhaps, however, Conway was unwittingly an even greater favorite of the New York social scene; despite not often performing in the city, he was known for his “ludicrous but entirely unaffected pomposity...intensified in effect by the spontaneous magniloquence of his speech and by his use of an inexhaustible store of orotund epithet and stately marching phrase.”⁷

Sarah Crocker married Frederick Conway in May of 1852, only months after his first wife died. Crocker was small, with a thin, expressive face, a graceful body, and a full head of curly dark hair to compliment Frederick’s receding hairline. She was noted for her sharp intellect, and was described as “of strong analytic power, sufficient to fit out half a dozen leading ladies.”⁸ The Conways acted together frequently, and when Frederick was asked to manage the brand new Pike’s Opera House in Cincinnati in 1859, Sarah Conway began to develop an interest in theatre management. Following a tour in England in 1861, Frederick and Sarah Conway looked to settle down, and they were offered the opportunity to run the Park Theatre in Brooklyn, an area that, legally and geographically, was separate from New York, and was lacking in theatre, making it a fertile field of endeavor. While Frederick was probably the better actor, Sarah was undeniably the better manager, aided, no doubt, by her “strong analytic power.” The Conways replaced Gabriel Harrison as manager of the Park Theatre in 1864. When that building proved too small for their theatrical ambitions, the Conways contracted Thomas R. Jackson to build a world-class theatre for Brooklyn in 1871. The building of this theatre was, in some small regard, an act of

revenge, according to the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, who wrote upon Sarah Conway's death in 1875 that the Conways "never forgave New York for allowing them to be crowded out of it. They yearned to rival the managers that had slighted them, as they thought, and determined to establish a first class theatre" in Brooklyn.⁹ In accepting the managerial role at the Park Theatre in 1864, the Conways began a project of transforming the city into a site of first-rate theatrical production. In contracting Jackson to build a brand new theatre, they doubled down on that plan.

Jackson was an architect with an impressive and lengthy resume, who had designed theaters and buildings all over the country, including the new Wallack's Theatre in New York barely a decade prior, and who boasted three decades of architectural experience. Jackson set about to build a theatre that could rival playhouses in New York, contributing to the transformation of Brooklyn into a theatrical destination; his design, ambitious and beautiful, was constructed over the spring and summer of 1871. The building occupied an L-shaped lot around Dieter's Hotel, with the front doors of the building leading from Washington Street into the vestibule and lobby. This portion of the building represented the short side of the L-shape at about 27x40 feet; the longer side housed the stage and audience seating, and ran parallel to Flood's Alley, opening up, from a stage door, onto Johnson Street, occupying 127x70 feet, and featuring three levels of seating. The parquet and parquet circles on the first floor were designed as expensive, exclusive seating for six hundred patrons. The second and third tiers were much more accessible in price, seating approximately a thousand patrons between them. The green room and music rooms were located under the stage — each had a window leading to the outside — and the dressing rooms extended up three stories in each of the wings. At their request, Jackson additionally built a private apartment for the Conways above the building; at Sarah

Conway's request, he designed a secret tunnel running underground from the stage to the box office, so that she could communicate with her business staff even while performing.

Embedded within the shape and dimensions of the theatrical space in the dense urbanity of Brooklyn are the themes of transformation that would dominate the memorial and cultural production in the post-disaster paradigm. These themes can be uncovered through Ulrich Beck, Wolfgang Bonss, and Christopher Lau's term "reflexive modernization." They argue, "when modernization reaches a certain stage...it begins to transform...not only the key institutions but also the very principles of society. But this time the principles and institutions being transformed are those of modern society."¹⁰ The processes of transformation that created the possibility of an urban environment simultaneously contributed to the increased presence of hazards inherent within that environment. Beck, Bonss, and Lau's insight provides significant opportunity for understanding the transformative power embedded within the layout of the Brooklyn Theatre: the processes of transformation that underlay the opportunity afforded by the theatre to transform Brooklyn into a major space of theatrical production also contributed significantly to the disastrous problems in emptying the space safely and quickly. In particular, the L-shape of the building organized the interior of the theatre and lobby in such a way that patrons in the second and third floors had to contend with numerous sharp, right-hand turns in order to descend the staircases. In the context of panic, the failure of patrons to safely navigate these turns created numerous human pile-ups around the staircases. Understood as an example of reflexive modernization, the shape and dimensions of the theatre were used to navigate and stake out a location in the dense urban environment of Brooklyn as a performative act of transformation, but simultaneously contributed to disastrous loss of life, and to the post-disaster paradigmatic framing of the event as transformative.

Conway's Brooklyn Theatre opened in October 1871, with a performance of Edward Butler-Lytton's *Money*.¹¹ The theatre became the primary performance space in Brooklyn — although that was not, perhaps, saying much. Upper-class Brooklyn residents were just as likely to ferry over to New York City to fulfill their theatrical desires, and the Conways responded by presenting a diverse array of performances, changing the bill almost nightly. The first year was “memorably disastrous in theatrical circles” and Sarah Conway often struggled — and failed — to pay the rent.¹² The theatre continued this way, with barely enough success to keep productions running, until Frederick Conway died of heart failure in September of 1874, and Sarah followed him in April of 1875, when the management of the theatre fell to their daughters, Minnie and Lille Conway, aged twenty-three and seventeen, respectively. While the sisters were fine performers, they had little of their mother's management sense, and their debts began to pile up quickly, owing primarily to the back rent they owed the building's owners, the Brooklyn Building Association (BBA), as well as the outrageous salaries they paid actors. When the BBA, upon Conway's death, offered Minnie and Lille the opportunity to erase the remaining debt by turning over the lease, the Conway sisters said no, and chose to continue running the theatre in their mother's memory. On July 16th, the Brooklyn Building Association comprised of a coalition of wealthy Brooklyn residents, demanded full payment of the Conway sisters' debts in the amount of \$10,000. Unable to pay, the theatre was returned to the Association, and was subsequently leased, the following month, to the management/producing team of Albert Palmer and Sheridan Shook, proprietors of the extremely successful Union Square Theatre in New York City.

Sheridan Shook and Albert Marshman Palmer were late arrivals to the theatre industry. Shook's Union Square Theatre began life as a vaudeville theatre, in the long, narrow former

dining room of the Union Place Hotel. The vaudeville performances didn't last; after a failed first year, Shook appointed bookkeeper Palmer to management of the theatre in 1872, and Palmer transformed the Union Square Theatre into a professional production house. Palmer's major contribution was to recruit stars to the Union Square repertory company, including a young James O'Neill, Clara Morris, and, in 1874, Kate Claxton as Louise in *The Two Orphans*. By the end of Palmer's first year of management, he had convinced the near-by theaters run by Augustin Daly and James Wallack that they had a competitor of note; by the end of his second year, the Union Square was the most popular house in the city.

Though Brooklyn loved Frederick and Sarah Conway, there was relief when the dispute involving Minnie and Lillie Conway was finished, and pleasure when it was announced the successful proprietors and managers of the Union Square had leased the building: "if almost uninterrupted success be accepted as evidence of ability," wrote the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, "the success of the Union Square during the last three years would warrant us in believing the Brooklyn Theatre has fallen into the hands of the ablest managers in New York. Of one thing we may be certain, it has fallen into the most liberal and most enterprising."¹³ Upon taking it over, Shook and Palmer worked to transform the house into the theatre the Conways had always imagined. The lighting that had been installed was considered to be top of the line and industrially safe. Additionally, upon their purchase, Shook and Palmer had taken pains to provide the house with necessary fire-fighting equipment; Lorraine Rogers, the Theatre's business manager, would report, "I visited the Brooklyn Theater in June, 1874, and saw hydrant, hose, axes, and other appliances for extinguishing fire. When I took a managerial position there, in Sept. 1876, these same appliances were there."¹⁴ The lights were also provided with the greatest

possible means of safety. Hamilton Weaver, the head machinist of the Brooklyn Theatre described the precautions taken in regards to the lighting:

The light was protected by a tin guard in front and a wire guard round in back. It was completely covered. If the drop swung back at all it would strike the solid tin guard and not the wire. I do not think the tin ever gets hot enough to set the canvas drop on fire, and besides, the canvas was not within a foot of it. The tin guard is one solid piece, reaching all the way across the stage, each one protecting a border light which is comprised of a row of forty burners.¹⁵

Like much of the rest of America, the Brooklyn Theatre was a site in continual flux: as it shifted from owner to owner, from production to production, the space was retrofitted with new technologies that stood in contrast to some of its other physical features. Shook and Palmer had retrofitted the Brooklyn Theatre to make use of the latest in gas-lighting technology, but had not invested in installing new, more comfortable seating; the theatre seemed to be stuck between time periods, marked by its incomplete transformation. While outward appearances may have suggested that Shook and Palmer had undertaken every means of providing for a safe and pleasurable house of theatrical amusements, what these technological innovations did instead was instill a false sense of security. Underneath the polished exterior, the Brooklyn Theatre was a disorganized and badly planned mess of a building. Like the Richmond Theatre before it, the Brooklyn Theatre stood constantly at the precipice of safety, a tinderbox lacking only a spark and a convenient source of fuel. The false sense of security that marked the management of the Brooklyn Theatre sociologically mirrored some of the political issues occurring in America in 1876, including a construction of society and of the theatre as ordered, as opposed to the chaotic reality affecting both.

Three large doors providing egress into the lobby, which featured, in turn, large doorways opening out onto Washington Street, serviced the parquet seating, reserved for upper-class citizens. Escape from this area was generally quick, easy, and relatively safe. The second and

third floors proved a much more difficult area from which to escape. The building had been designed for a quick evacuation in a matter of five to six minutes under emergency circumstances. Jackson, the architect and engineer of the building, attempted to meet this safety standard by providing wide staircases to the dress and family circles for patrons to make safe and efficient exits from the second and third floors. The dress circle, on the second floor, provided two exits; one large main door in the center of the building led to a flight of stairs that broke in the middle at a ninety degree landing, and continued downward to the lobby. Another, smaller exit led to a flight of stairs to Flood's Alley and Johnson Street, and had a sign hanging over it reading "exit to Johnson Street."¹⁶ There was additionally an unmarked third door that connected to a landing on the family circle staircase, providing a short, specific exit strategy for fire emergencies. About that door, Fire Marshall Keady would later report that he "cannot learn from any source that this door had been opened by any one..."¹⁷

The family circle, on the third floor, had no doors separating the lobby from the theatre; curtained partitions provided egress from the theatre onto a balcony overlooking the lobby. Audience members on the Washington Street side of the theatre found themselves very close to the staircase, and probably could have made a quick escape; those people unlucky enough to be sitting opposite Washington Street in the family circle would have found themselves having to cross a treacherous strip of increasingly crowded real estate to the only staircase servicing their seats. The staircase ascended approximately twenty feet to the next floor, and under normal circumstances, provided wide enough passage that exit would be safe, effective and quick. Weakened by fire and pervaded by a panicked populace, the staircases, as well built as they may have been, wouldn't last very long.

Although Jackson claimed the building had been designed for quick and easy evacuation, it's clear that disaster events holds powerful transformative purchase on how an audience member imbricated within such a disaster process is able to read and analyze the space. The door on the third floor, designed specifically for disaster relief, probably remained entirely unopened and unused, and the wide staircases could not be designed to take into consideration masses of people jostling for space. The disaster traumatically transformed the theatre space itself, and any advancement implied by Jackson's architecture withered and crumbled under the fire's influence.

In the months immediately preceding the destructive fire on December 5th, 1876, the Brooklyn Theatre had experienced two flare-ups. The first had happened in November when a curtain in the box office took fire; this was quickly extinguished. The second was more serious; in late October or early November, stagehand William Dooley saw the rubber hose connecting a gas-outlet to the border-lighting fixtures spewing flames. William Salts, a carpenter and fly-man of the theatre quickly extinguished this flare-up. These events suggest the commonality of flare-ups in theatres being understood as a discrete event, unworthy of mention. These events also suggest the depth of apathy afforded to fires in theatres; fires were often of this kind and quality: easily managed, easily extinguished, hardly worth a mention. Some of the actors of the Brooklyn company had even escaped flaming theaters before: Harry Murdoch had been engaged at Pike's Opera House in Cincinnati when, ten years earlier, during a production of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, the theatre, and several adjacent buildings, burned to the ground in a multimillion dollar civic loss. Scott G. Knowles articulates the tolerance of the dangers of fire in the nineteenth century "by citizens with relatively low expectations of strong government action towards public safety, and high hopes for rapid construction and economic growth."¹⁸ The Brooklyn Theatre was a disaster mirroring the prevailing values of the society in which it occurred, a site already

marked through its history by the transformational trauma that would come to serve as the major model for producing memory work.

Part II, Chapter 5: Grand Transformation Scene

Radical Change and Renewal

If the Brooklyn Theatre was a space marked by its relationship to constant transformation, from its construction in L-shaped spatial organization understood as a product of reflexive modernization, to the numerous managerial and artistic changes it went through during its short life, it was also a space, like the Richmond Theatre, marked by the ever-lurking presence of conflagratory danger. This chapter traces the events inside the Brooklyn Theatre the night it burned down. My goal is to create a narrative of the progression of the fire from its inception to the collapsing of the walls of the building just before midnight that underscores how the historical/spatial relationship between the theatre's organizational and managerial strategies related to the disastrous progression of the fire and how this progression, in turn, contributed to the use of narrativial and rhetorical tropes of positive sociopersonal development and transformation in the post-disaster paradigm.

To write this narrative/historical chapter, I collected, analyzed, and recounted a number of narratives about the disaster that were published in newspapers, journals, and governmental records of the investigation of the fire. While collecting this data, I came to the realization that these victim narratives were, themselves, forms of memorial production undertaken in the post-disaster paradigm. In giving these narratives, survivors were performing a specific kind of cultural production, identified in *Exploring the Boundaries of Crisis Communication* by Timothy Sellnow and Matthew Seeger as “a recognition of the inadequacy of the established sense making structures” and the requisite need for “new sense making structures.”¹⁹ Writing about the Red River Valley flood in 1997, Seeger and Sellnow write,

Traditionally, crisis has been framed as inherently and overwhelmingly threatening, destructive, and devastating...within this flood episode, however, may be found

important positive outcomes. Floods, as with other natural disasters, are often forces of renewal...the crisis removed the assumption of the status quo and created the opportunity for radical change and renewal.²⁰

If disasters are known not simply for their destructive capacity, but also for the opportunity they present for “radical change and renewal,” then the logical question is, who defines the terms of the disaster as potentially positive? In Richmond, religious forces seized upon “the opportunity for radical change and renewal” through controlling the post-disaster narratives as an act of God; this religious construction was already embedded within the community of Richmond in 1811 itself. Similarly, as I argued in the previous chapter, the destabilization wrought by national transformation was already embedded within the country, and Brooklyn, in 1876. This, in turn, produced disaster narratives that foregrounded the theme of transformation in the recounting of the event.

This tendency to think about the Brooklyn Theatre fire in terms of transformation is a standard trope of disaster narratives. In a broad, multi-decade survey of disaster narratives, Phyllis Scott Carlin and Linda M. Park-Fuller identify “five interweaving performance keys” shared by such stories: first, “the recounting of disaster premonitions or lack of them”; second, “the moment when the teller is shocked into experience”; third, the “convincing the audience that a seemingly impossible situation occurred and that the tellers were in its midst and must now describe it”; fourth, “descriptions of experiences in the immediate aftermath”; finally, “evaluative assessments of the long-range impact and recovery along with interpretation of significance to self, family, community, society and history.”²¹ Embedded within these five performance keys of disaster narratives is the implied relationship between disaster survival and radical change and renewal.

With specific relation to the Brooklyn Theatre fire, this tendency for transformational narrative construction was perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in Kate Claxton's reporting of the event. As she made her successful exit from the burning building, Kate Claxton would hazard a glance back, just as the fire burst through the doors and windows in a "sheet of flame." The scene was, it seemed to Claxton, "a grand transformation scene."²² The invocation of the term "grand transformation scene" is illustrative of the same tendency located in Richmond to describe the disaster through a theatrical vocabulary, as well as perhaps the first example in the record regarding the narrative trope of transformation that came to dominate historical writing and memory work regarding the fire.

The most popular use of the term is the final scene of the nineteenth-century scripts of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, wherein the titular character is transported from Earth to the splendor of Heaven, allegorically transporting the audience along with him. There's a useful tension in Claxton's evocation of the term. Typically, the term applies the scene during which Tom's earthly suffering has come to an end, and he is ascending into the comfort and peace of heaven, his reward for a lifetime of dutiful service and obedience. Claxton's invocation must be understood in the opposite sense, as if the terror of Hell was made manifest on Earth. The presence and practice of the scene from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* would have been well enough engrained in Claxton's mind and vocabulary to suggest a purposeful analogy to explain the power, intensity, and terror of the Brooklyn fire, as if there were supernatural forces operating on the earthly plane.

The Theatre is On Fire

The curtain had fallen on the penultimate act of the December 5th production of *The Two Orphans* at the Brooklyn Theatre to rapturous applause, and the actors hurriedly moved towards

their places for the final act while the orchestra played, and the crew shifted the scenery from the grim courtyard of the hospital/jail La Salpetriere to La Frochard's meager hovel on the banks of the Seine. It was a difficult and complete shift of scenery, moving from the leafless trees surrounding the open courtyard to the completely enclosed hovel, a poor, "dilapidated boat-house" box set, enclosing the actors from the top as well as both wings. The shift had required twelve men during the play's run at the Union Square Theatre, but since it had moved to the smaller space at the Brooklyn Theatre, tonight it was handled by only eight.²³ Above the actors, a roof, made of canvas, hung. Beyond the boat-house, a drop cloth depicting Paris at twilight was moved into place for the scene, and the climactic moment, when Picard, the valet to the Chevalier de Vaudry, aided by a group of supernumeraries playing police officers, bursts into the hovel, in search of his master's love, the beautiful and kind Henriette. At the same time, the Chevalier himself disarms the evil and malicious Jacques Frochard. The gaslights, rows of forty six-foot burners running across the stage high above, dimmed. It would be dark in the hovel, atmospheric and dangerous.

In the wings, John B. Studley stood with Henry S. Murdoch and Kate Claxton, preparing for their entrances. Murdoch was anxious but excited; his widowed mother and his sisters were due in town the next night.²⁴ He loved and doted on his family, and was proud to be the only source of income for them. Perhaps he winced and tried to stretch his torso; his sides, he told company member Maud Harrison, were in pain, a result of either sciatica or pleurisy, a physical ailment appropriate for playing the crippled Pierre.²⁵ As the scene shift ended, Claxton made her way to the uncomfortable straw bed upon which Louise lay when the final act begins. She was the prisoner of the Frochard family, along with Pierre, the virtuous but hated and crippled

younger brother of the evil Jacques, the only member of the family to show Louise any kindness. Murdoch took his place on a barrel near her.

In the house, the orchestra played, and the audience members shifted in their seats, uncomfortable. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* had described the seating in the theatre as antiquated, “of the old fashioned sofa style,” probably similar to the seats in the pit at the Richmond Theatre, decried as, “decidedly behind the present times...in no respect equal either in convenience or comfort to those in...other places of amusements.”²⁶ The house was good, but not full, and especially not the expensive seats, the parquet seats. The cheap seats, the dress and family circles, were fairly full, though, and young men and women enjoyed the contrivances of *Two Orphans*’ numerous fight-and-rescue plot twists. *Two Orphans*, a prototypical kind of play for the Union Square house from whence the production came, which enjoyed showing American adaptations of French works, had enjoyed a long, sustained run at Union Square, illustrative of its broad, national popularity: *Two Orphans* was one of the great financial successes of nineteenth century theatre, a popular, well-written, mechanical melodrama that played upon audience sentiment, featured fearsome villainy, noble heroes, and enormous pathos for the suffering orphans. It was the kind of show designed to appeal to popular audiences, and Sheridan Shook and A.M. Palmer hoped its presence at the Brooklyn Theatre would help legitimate the house to Brooklyn and New York audiences alike.

It was 11:20. The curtain rose. Then Claxton heard it.

“The theatre is on fire.”

Up in the fly space, seemingly unbeknownst to anyone, the veteran carpenter John Cummerson was attending his nightly duties among the flies.²⁷ Cummerson had fifteen years of experience as a stage carpenter, and had been at work at the Brooklyn Theatre since Sarah and

Frederick Conway opened it. He identified the cut-wood drop had caught fire — but how? A gust of wind and oxygen from an open stage door? Interaction between the drop and the gas-jet lights? The question was moot; Cummerson worked quickly to staunch the flames. Though the border lights had been raised and set in properly, Cummerson noted difficulty when he tried to lower them: “when I come to let them down,” he said, “they dragged. I tried to put the green curtain down and then she broke. Nothing broke before the fire. This was the commencement of the trouble.”²⁸ Frustrated, Cummerson cursed the border lights; he had long thought they were “too flimsy” and were in want of “new ‘knitting.’”²⁹

It is clear that Cummerson had previously identified safety issues with the lights, just as William Anderson had identified safety issues in Richmond, and a litany of individuals would identify safety issues at the Iroquois in Chicago. The chronological organization of the disaster case studies of this dissertation creates an arc of technological spectacle from candles to electricity, all of which contribute to the creation of environments of danger onstage, an example of the transformative dangers of reflexive modernization that marked the Conflagration Era as a time period uniquely suited to disastrous conflagrations. The goal of using these technologies should always be understood as progressing towards safety — gas being more controllable than candle, and electricity more controllable than gas — but this was rarely the line of thinking of theatrical producers and managers. Instead, installing and using the latest technology was understood as a way to market the theatre and the theatre’s production of spectacle, always undertaken with the concomitant risk of fire. Technologies of theatre production, when poorly understood, heighten the potential for devastation. Despite the identification of the shortcomings of these technologies, the complacency that marks the time between identifying the potential danger and the outbreak of a fire suggests a willful disregard for the safety of the audience

members, and a difficult relationship between the progression of technologies of spectacle and technologies of hazard mitigation.

Cummerson's remarks also suggest the tendency of disasters to be made worse by the very tools put in place to prevent them, another illustration of the inherent dangers of reflexive modernization. A disaster's ability to re-write reality through disruption seems to have its first effect on the technologies created to stop or stall the progress of disaster. The elemental power of fire to weaken and destroy the mechanisms operating the border lights in the Brooklyn Theatre meant that the fire had easy access to the roof. This quickening of disaster had been seen in Richmond, and would also be seen in Chicago, when the asbestos curtain failed to lower completely to the floor. These reinforce Scott G. Knowles' argument that, "there is no perfectly safe building, only buildings evolving towards safety" and that safety should always be understood as illusive.³⁰

Claxton hissed up at Murdoch. "Go on, they will put it out; there will be a panic; go on!"³¹ Murdoch continued, and Mary Farren made her entrance as the matriarch La Frochard, followed shortly by John Studley as Jacques. Farren crossed to Claxton, grabbing her by the back of the head, demanding cruelly, "come, get up, my fine lady. No more airs, you must go out and make your living."³² As Claxton's head wrenched back, she whispered to Farren, "is it fire or not?"³³ Farren was taken aback and both women risked a look above.

"I'm afraid so," Farren replied.³⁴

"I saw little tongues of flame licking through the canopy," Claxton said later. "Mr. Murdoch, Mr. Studley, and Mrs. Farren saw them at the same time. Then we heard a horrible roaring noise behind the scenery. This alarmed me more than the sight of the fire."³⁵ Shaken, but determined, Claxton and the actors attempted to carry on with the show, but it was not long until

the audience's panic became too great. The last line Claxton managed to recite was, "you have starved, tortured, *beaten* me; but now, feeble as I am, my will shall be stronger than your violence! I will beg no more!"³⁶ By that time, the "little tongues of flame" had begun raining down upon the stage, catching the canvas roof of the box set in the process and igniting it.

Edward B. Dickinson, audience member, was sat in the parquet, accompanied by his wife and a friend. "All at once there seemed to be an unusual disturbance among the scene shifters at the back of the stage," he would say later. "The confusion increased rapidly, but still the play was not interrupted." A long time patron of the theatre, Dickinson knew something was amiss: "either...one of the workmen had fallen from above while manipulating the ropes, or...the theatre was on fire."³⁷ John Hartman, an employee of the Department of City Works, in attendance with his wife and son, described the same thing

I heard a curious noise on the stage, resembling loud talking between a number of men, which I thought very unusual...When they had got about half through the act I noticed the same noise again, only it was louder and they seemed to be hurriedly moving in the scenes behind.³⁸

Note the way in which both Dickinson and Hartman's narratives demonstrate the first of Carlin and Park-Weaver's five performance keys of disaster narrative, "the recounting of disaster premonitions," configured as a natural response to new sensory stimuli: a feeling that something was wrong, without direct confirmation, only to have that feeling proved correct.³⁹ The theatre *was* on fire, and the audience transitioned from unease into full-blown panic. Note also the confused anxiety Dickinson articulates about the unclear transition from spectatorship to participation in the disaster process. This confusion illustrates the failure of successful transition from theatre event to disaster process.

Perhaps the best known episode of the Brooklyn Theatre fire contributed significantly to audience confusion: the report of Claxton, Murdoch, Farren and Studley, standing before the

audience and asking for calm. As the danger became pronounced, they abandoned all pretense of performance. The fire had gone from smoldering to out of control in scant minutes, and backstage attempts to control the fire were proving futile at best, and exacerbating the danger at worst. Some in the audience thought they were seeing the latest and greatest special effects, but others knew better; the flames had snuck up to the ceiling, and flaming sheets of fabric were beginning to fall around the four performers. A cry of “fire!” went up in the house, and the audience immediately stood, ready to make a hasty exit.⁴⁰

“Shut up,” came another shout. “There is no fire!” In the confusion, people in the gallery stood and hesitated.⁴¹ Because of the placement of the fire — above the stage — people on the first floor could look up into the rafters and see the burning set pieces; those sat above the line of the stage had no such ability to see the fire. As the danger continued to become clear, “everybody in the gallery had risen and was rushing for the doors in a solid mass,” reported survivor J. P. McKinney, and “men caught hold of those nearest and stripped their clothing from their backs.”⁴² The actors dropped out of their characters and walked down to the footlights.

“Do not panic,” John Studley announced, trying to clear the rising din of the audience with his voice. “There is no need to panic.”

“Will the people keep their seats? We are between you and the fire,” Kate Claxton announced. “We will burn first.”⁴³ Some of the members in the parquet held their seats, but audience members in the dress and family circles, much more crowded, were not so eager to listen to the actors. The family circle, in particular, Fire Marshal Keady would later note, was typically composed of “the class of people” who “are the most restless.”⁴⁴

“Sit still,” Murdoch shouted, “there is no danger.”

Charles Thorne was still in the wings. “There *is* danger,” Thorne yelled to his fellow cast mates. “Get out of the theatre as soon as possible.”⁴⁵

One common question a researcher must ask when digging into theatre fires regards reasons actors continue to perform, even when they have knowledge of the potential danger posed by the flames? It happened in Richmond, and would happen again in Chicago. Nineteenth-century theatres seemed to be predisposed to destruction by flames; why would they not stop the action and encourage the audience to leave in a timely and safe fashion? “The presence of mind of the actor in time of the gravest danger has been to the advantage of theatergoers on more than one occasion,” William Ellis Horton would later write, “and it is known where actors have held an audience in laughter while the house force were fighting a fire on the stage.”⁴⁶ This was Murdoch and Claxton’s plan, was the plan of Hopkins Robinson in Richmond, and must have been the plan in Chicago, as well: continue the scene, “hold the audience,” and allow the backstage crew to extinguish the fire, as they had at least twice before, never allowing the patrons to become any the wiser about the danger they were in.

The development and implementation of technologies of spectacle outpaced technologies of hazard mitigation, and ultimately this outpacing often created an even greater capacity for danger. As disaster processes develop, the technologies built to mitigate those processes, not being par with the proximate causes of the disaster, fail spectacularly and, in this failure, increase the levels of danger and potential destruction. So, too, does the actors’ response to the developing disaster event: when the actors do not stop the show, as they did not in Brooklyn, the danger of the environment increases greatly. Just as technologies of hazard mitigation are often unwitting causes of devastation, a human, acting in what he or she perceives to be the best interests of the audience, may also inadvertently increase the danger posed by a disaster process,

a microcosmic form of the reflexive modernization that marked the organization of the Brooklyn Theatre itself.

The flames spread rapidly, and Cummerson abandoned his attempts to extinguish the fire. As he returned to the stairs, he found himself trapped, the fire preventing him from safely returning to the floor. He passed Murdoch, who was headed toward his dressing room and, Cummerson thought, to attempt to escape via the ceiling. Bereft of other options, and feeling the skin on his face and hands crackle with heat, feeling his lungs blacken with smoke, Cummerson hurled himself through the second story window into Flood's Alley. Ida Vernon, a performer who had left upon the completion of her final scene, returned to her brother's apartment, down the street from the theatre. She heard the crash of the window breaking, "and an instant later she saw a man leap from one of the gallery windows of the theater into the alley in the rear."⁴⁷ Cummerson hit the alleyway, bruised and unconscious, broken but not dead, and was eventually transported, by some Good Samaritan, to the Long Island Hospital.

By the time the parquet seating was almost entirely cleared, with relative speed and safety, the actors still onstage knew they had to make their escape. Performers in the nineteenth century were synonymous with their roles, and were known to perform those roles in different productions all across the country, an example of what was known as the star system. In support of that system were cabinet cards, photographic trading cards of the actors in character that were printed and distributed to fans. To that end, actors owned and controlled their own wardrobes. Before even viewing the performance, audiences would have a good idea about what the characters looked like and actors had to meet those expectations.

It's not surprising, then, that Claxton, Murdoch, and Farren's first instincts were to return to their dressing rooms, against the obvious impulse for self-preservation. Murdoch in particular

would have been wise to make a hasty retreat; his physical ailments must have hindered his ability to climb the numerous stairs to his second-floor, stage left dressing room. Nevertheless, he limped off in that direction in order to retrieve his clothing and valuables. He had survived one fire; what was another? Claxton was fearful: she grabbed Murdoch's wrist as he limped off stage towards the stars, and begged him to escape with his life.

"No," Murdoch replied. He wanted to retrieve his coat.⁴⁸ Claude Burroughs had the same idea, and Van Sicklen, ascending the staircases towards their dressing rooms, saw the two men. Van Sicklen told them to stop, to turn around and get out of the theatre, but the men continued upwards.⁴⁹ The instinct to retrieve their clothing may illustrate how lowly these actors regarded the threat posed by the fire: faced with the possibility of death, the actors were able to overcome the instinctual fight or flight response of the sympathetic nervous system. Just as technologies of hazard mitigation, in failing to keep pace with technologies of spectacle, contributed to heightening the environment of disaster development, in failing to regard the reality of the danger posed by the fire, the actors similarly contributed to the worsening of the disaster process. The fire's ability to traumatically transform extended even to the human body, transforming, in the act, the actor into disaster agent.

A Quiet Termination

If disaster is understood as an agent of a process of social change, it must be noted that the influence of disaster is far-reaching. This section examines events outside of the theatre as the initial carnage of the fire came to an end in order to illustrate the diffusions of the transformative power of disaster, and how these transformative powers generate immediate change and, in doing so, help to define narrative strategies for writing about the event. In Richmond, the immediate responses to the disaster constructed the fire as an act of God, and this mode of

thinking created the paradigm in which narrative tropes around that theme were created and spread. This section argues that in Brooklyn, the fire's tendency toward traumatic transformation provided the narrative framing that would come to dominate memorial production about the event, and that this tendency was powerfully imbricated within the initial physical organization of the area immediately surrounding the building; in Claxton's words, the spectacle of the burning theatre reminded her of "a grand transformation scene."⁵⁰

Murdoch and Burroughs left their dressing rooms and prepared to descend the stairs. However, what was once a theatre had transformed into a virtual hell, and walls of fire and ever-increasing volumes of smoke cut them off from the stairs. They made for the grooves, trying to cross the stage on the suspended workers' lofts, in hopes that the stairway on the other side would be safer. J.W. Thorpe, the stage manager saw them there, on the grooves, trying desperately to reach safety. Thorpe was unable to offer help, and had to escape the building himself, lest he die. The stairs on both sides of the scaffolding were enveloped, burning heavily, and the platform the men were on was weakening. They were trapped. The false sense of security with which they had navigated to their dressing room gave way to the horror of the moment.

Claxton and Farren had fled the stage to their dressing rooms under the theatre and found Maud Harrison there, gathering some of her own valuables. Claxton grabbed Farren and Harrison and implored them to "let those things go, and come on, for God's sake. We must go out the front way. The fire is gaining on us now. Look!"⁵¹ She pointed at the ceiling, and the three actors saw the stage floor above them begin to splinter and crack. The way out through the stage door was blocked by fire and debris, and the ceiling above began to threaten to cave in on them. Faced with impending doom, Claxton remembered Sarah Conway's secret passageway.⁵²

Claxton, Farren, and Harrison headed toward the doorway to the narrow, crooked, dark passage, its own ceiling splintering and filling the tunnel with smoke, the fire following closely behind them. As the women rushed down the hallway, a horrifying thought struck Claxton: *what if the door was locked?*⁵³ Claxton bounded up the stairs towards the door, and listened for a moment, hesitating, the terror of the possibility that she had led herself and her two fellow actors into a terrible death paralyzing her. “We must really have hesitated only a flash,” she said, “but it seemed to me that we stood there for hours.”⁵⁴ She tried the knob; the door opened, and the three women entered into a lobby that had transformed into chaos. The stairs to the family circle were blocked at the landing by a large woman whose foot had become stuck; behind her, a human pile of bodies were trampling and being trampled upon. Smoke was beginning to fill the lobby, and although the doors to Johnson Street were accommodating, they must have seemed tiny and impossible as a thousand people struggled to reach them. Claxton and the others began their fight out of the box office, into the lobby, and towards the street. In the violence, Claxton was knocked down multiple times, and was once brought face to face with another human being upon whom she was trampling. “Oh my god, it was a fearful sight,” she recalled later. “I shall never forget it.”⁵⁵ Claxton and the other actors finally made it outside, still in their costumes, with Claxton clad in the rags of Louise. They had made it to safety.

Disaster operates a powerful ability to re-write, re-organize, and transform spatial and temporal significance, an effect similar to theatre’s ability to condense, skip, switch, or otherwise alter time and space for the duration of a performance. In the case of the development of the Brooklyn Theatre fire, in the short time span between the genesis of the fire and its eruption out of the building, the destabilizing relationship shared between theatre and disaster was greatly magnified by the fact that two separate spatiotemporal realms existed simultaneously: inside of

the building, panic and chaos reigned. Outside, “carriages rumbled as they drew up near the entrance,” the *New York Tribune* reported, apparently under the assumption of “a quiet termination of the play.”⁵⁶

In the tension between the simultaneous existences of disaster time and space and non-disaster time and space, the transformation from normal to disaster proves traumatic, not only psychologically, but sociologically and spatiotemporally, illustrating the deep effect disaster has upon not only victims, but communities, time and space; what the carriages found was not a “quiet termination,” but a bizarre admixture of panic and chaos, of still-costumed performers and wailing audience members, and a large amount of hotel furniture. The damage to the theatre made it a complete loss, and only half an hour into the blaze, just before midnight, the Johnson St. wall collapsed with a creak and a groan, sending embers and sparks dancing into the night sky. The streets were dense with thousands of people, victims and curious spectators alike, wailing and crying. Once hard dirt, Washington Street had been turned into a muddy swamp by the water from fire hoses being sloshed through by the throngs of feet.

Furniture and luggage from the adjoining Dieter’s Hotel had been removed from tenants’ rooms and brought down to the street, hoping to deny the fire any potential kindling, turning the street into a bizarre outdoors living room. Some people sat on the chairs, beds, and couches, watching the smoke rise into the night sky, underscoring the inherent and spectacular theatricality of the disaster. For a time, lines of identity demarcation were disrupted and erased, and “all classes of people composed the assemblage — men, women and children — all drawn to the spot by an excitement which leveled all distinctions of race or sex.”⁵⁷ The chaos of the scene juxtaposed the serenity and calm of the evening, lit by the large moon overhanging it all.⁵⁸ The survivors that had made it out of the theatre were in obvious panic, had tumbled out in waves and

streams, some bereft of clothing, perhaps trying to unburden themselves, perhaps trying to remove the fabric before it seared itself to their skin, “many of the women [were] so terrified that they tore their clothes from their bodies and threw them on the street. Many fainted from fright, and many others, injured in the struggle to reach the open air, fell exhausted when they stepped into the street.”⁵⁹ There was no accounting for who had survived, but spirits were as high as they could have been.

After the fire had been contained, Chief Engineer Thomas F. Nevins stepped into the “grand transformation scene” of the Brooklyn Theatre. When he first entered, the lobby was dark and smoky, and he failed to make out anything in particular, aside from the huge hole in the lobby floor and, just beyond that, what he guessed was a large pile of rubbish, probably the debris from the destroyed balcony and stairs. The pit was still “of fire and flame,” and was emitting “a dense smoke and steam,” and going any further was impossible.⁶⁰ Nevins had refused to venture any further into the building until a complete inspection of the remaining wall of the theatre had been completed, but reported that it seemed almost everybody had escaped with their life. There would be men going door-to-door throughout the city tomorrow, asking at apartments and houses if anyone was missing, but the general feeling in the crowd was that almost everyone had escaped unscathed, a disastrous loss of a building, but nothing so grim as what may have happened.

Day broke, grim and grey: December 6th, and though “there was a gloom in Brooklyn which could be felt even in the streets,” reporters’ accounts of the blaze went out in “the morning papers ...announcing that only two lives had been lost.”⁶¹ Later that day, after the horrifying truth was learned, under the rubble of what was once the stage, buried under timber and masonry, the broken bodies of Claude Burroughs and Harry Murdoch were discovered,

identifiable by their relative position to the other two hundred and ninety-five victims of the fire, as well as the “aiguillettes [Burroughs] wore, and the peculiar conformation of his teeth, which were examined by a Brooklyn dentist who had previous treated him.”⁶² The firefighters prepared to re-enter the building, to survey the damage, to clear out the few bodies they anticipated finding inside.

The events at the Brooklyn Theatre illustrate the dangers that marked the reflexive modernization of the widespread transformational effects of the Industrial Revolution, as the development and implementation of theatrical technologies of spectacle greatly outpaced the implementation of technologies of hazard mitigation. Just as themes of fatalism and divine justice underscored the social context of the fire at the Richmond Theatre in 1811, themes of transformation and sociological change underscored the social context of the fire at Brooklyn, and, as I examine in the following chapter, contributed in powerful ways to the memory work undertaken in the post-disaster paradigm.

Part II, Chapter 6: Safe for the People to Gather

The Hell Mouth of the Brooklyn Theatre

This chapter focuses on socially shared performances of grief and suffering in the post-disaster paradigm, understood as performances undertaken to abate the pain and anxiety of traumatic transformation. First, I describe the transformative power the fire performed upon the city of Brooklyn experienced as firefighters and morticians struggled to meet the effects of the disaster, and the widespread transformative power of the disaster as it rewrote the spatiotemporal significance of the area surrounding the destroyed theatre into a large scale morgue. Then, I consider how the ruins of the building were transformed into a site of shared memory as citizens came in the days following the fire to bear witness to the site of carnage. I finish by describing the memorial services held through Brooklyn and New York as performances of social values, and compare the religious rhetoric to that espoused by the clergy in Richmond in 1811. I conclude with an analysis of the history and construction of the monument to the dead that was placed years later in Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery.

Significantly, the primary themes of the responses given by Brooklyn's clergy played upon the issues of transformation embedded within the disaster event. Transformation was constructed as a way to re-establish disrupted structures of order through enacting positive personal and social change. In *The Popular Culture of Disaster*, Gary Webb argues,

Arguably the greatest impediment to effective disaster response in the United States is the perpetuation of disaster myths, even among those in the emergency management profession. These myths suggest that disasters create chaos, panic, looting and other antisocial behavior — that is, complete social breakdown. Of course, 50 years of social science research demonstrates that the opposite occurs in the wake of disaster — crime rates go down, solidarity increases, and pro-social behavior prevails. If communities are actually resilient under stress, why do so many people, including public officials, believe they are so fragile and susceptible to collapse?⁶³

The field of disaster sociology has identified the positive impacts disaster may make upon afflicted communities. In Webb's view, the construction of a disaster event as phenomenal or divine contributes to the perpetuation of negative stereotyping of disaster events as chaotic, panicked, or otherwise antisocial. Understood this way, Richmond's distinctly religious response contributed to the development of the Conflagration Era's disastrous environment by attributing the disaster to God's divine justice. The responses to Brooklyn's fire exemplifies how a productive relationship between elite-level governmental and grass-roots community processing of the disaster event contributed significantly to disaster's positive potential through a collaborative relationship and a shared central message: we must remember those who died, and through that remembrance, must ensure it never happens again.

A hell mouth is a theatrical set piece, a constructed entrance to Hell, usually expressed as the gaping maw of a horrifying beast. The hell mouth was a popular image in theatrical performances and paintings during Middle Ages; in the theatre, this trope found expression primarily in liturgical dramas, located stage left, in opposition of a depiction of heaven stage right. They were used in biblical cycle plays outside of the church, designed to terrify and inspire awe; they depicted sinners suffering for their earthly actions, sometimes boiling in cauldrons, and other times being tortured by demons. They served as a nexus of secular ingenuity — the spectacle of pyrotechnics and smoke billowing outward through monstrous teeth, upon which rested the bodies of the sinful, must have terrified audiences — and violent, otherworldly justice; a semiotic of horror, and awe, a warning to the audience: *there but for the grace of God go I*. Nevins probably didn't make the association with theatre's history, but the spectacular effect of terror and awe that he must have felt, as he stepped back into the lobby of the theatre on the

morning of the 6th, was likely similar to that which was experienced by patrons of Medieval liturgical dramas.

The stairs and the upper balcony had collapsed, plummeted to the floor, and smashed through it, leaving a huge, gaping maw of wood, and smoke, and ash. Nevins could enter only a few steps onto the shuddering lobby floor before it disappeared into a black pit of wreckage, still smoldering with smoke and fire. At the precipice of the pit, her dead, fleshless hands grasping hopelessly toward the door, the body of a woman had been seared into place, trapped forever between freedom and the lobby's pit of despair. As he looked down into the hell mouth that had transformed from what was once the lobby of the Brooklyn Theatre, Nevins came to a grisly realization: that was not simply the debris of stairs and balconies he was seeing, as he had supposed only hours earlier. It had transformed into a sudden, brutal, mass grave, filled with body parts, with human beings melted together, completely indistinguishable from one another. The ticket booth propped another body up casually against the door, as if it were leaning for comfort, waiting for someone to save him.⁶⁴

Nevins entered the pit and "was horrified to find that the whole heap of what I had thought to be rubbish was a compact mass of human bodies, burned and twisted into the most distorted positions. The whole of the cellar under the lobby of the theatre was densely packed with the remains of those who, but a few hours previous, had been in full possession of life and vigor."⁶⁵ Every hour, the news inside of the theatre got worse. "At first," the *Daily Eagle* reported that afternoon,

It was believed that few, if any lives had been lost. At about 7 o'clock it was known that at least twenty persons had been burned to death or smothered. By 9 o'clock the list of deaths had risen to seventy. At 11 o'clock ninety victims were counted, and now, at 2 o'clock, it is evident that not fewer than two hundred persons have perished.⁶⁶

Nevins and his crew came to understand the difficulty — almost the impossibility — of the task before them. The bodies they found “were bent into horrid shapes, assumed in the struggles of death by suffocation and by burning. Nine or ten of the corpses had an arm upraised and bent to shield the face,” a condition known in medical terminology today as the “pugilistic stance” or “pugilistic attitude,” assumed when, because of intense heat, large arm and leg musculature contract and pull in towards the torso or face. Nevins and his workers descended into the hell mouth and began removing bodies, extricating bones from other bones and attempting, as much as possible, to preserve the twisted corpses. The men located bodies by “the watch chain and other jewelry” which, in the artificial light of the lamps brought in to aid the workers, gave off “beautiful bright” glints.⁶⁷ The men converged on these glints, with “opera glasses, chains, studs, purses and even watches...found under and on the bodies,” which “were thrown to one side upon a spread-out newspaper,” to be collected later and sent along to the morgues for possible identification.⁶⁸ Later, an official would describe the impossibility of speedy removal and a process of continual discovery: “as fast as we remove one tier of bodies other appear below them, and it is impossible to tell how many remain in that dreadful place.”⁶⁹ Nevins had his men build a wooden ramp into the hell mouth, and upon this ramp, they lowered and raised coffins filled with bodies and bones. By nightfall, two hundred bodies had been removed from the lobby. Nevins had no idea that, in the dress circle above them, almost one hundred more bodies lay, waiting to be discovered. Outside, through the dense crowd, vehicles struggled to arrive at the theatre to transport bodies away. The work was slow and brutal.

That Claxton called the building “a grand transformation scene” is correct, but she probably didn’t appreciate the subtleties of her shell-shocked analysis. The fire itself did transform the building, metaphorically and physically. It is in the post-disaster paradigm, though,

that the traumatically transformative power of the disaster event becomes most evident, as the disaster event strains the resources of the city past their breaking point, what Bos, Ullberg, and 't Hart call "the disaster after the disaster."⁷⁰ The morgues and undertakers around Brooklyn began sending hearses and boxes immediately, conveying bodies to morgues. The *Tribune* noted, "the Brooklyn Morgue was early overtaxed in affording space for the corpses, and one of the unoccupied market places was converted into a temporary morgue."⁷¹ When the morgues were full of the deceased, an abandoned meat market and other buildings in the immediate area were conscripted into service, transforming the area around the theatre into a giant morgue, similar to the transformation of the area around the Richmond Theatre, and to what would occur in Chicago in 1903; in the disruption of disaster, spaces became rewritten and re-signified.

The site of a disaster event becoming a sort of shrine in remembrance of the dead is not a surprise, nor is it unique. The testimonies of George Munford and others, related to the Richmond fire, and of the people noted below, reveal the desire for a social closeness to the event, a need for participation in the disaster process, and, to some extent, an ownership over the disaster. The disaster event crosses over time, physical space, and personal psyche; disaster is always a shared experience, and the powerful influence of traumatic transformation affects members of the community otherwise unrelated to the event. Anne Eyre writes that the congregation of survivors and community members at these sites can be read for their symbolic value as a part of new rituals that develop in the post-disaster paradigm. Eyre writes,

Following disaster, when a fundamental sense of order and security can feel threatened, the potential value of such rituals in reestablishing feelings of control, belonging, and social solidarity within and beyond one's immediate community is understandable.⁷²

In historical narratives of disaster, it is often the absences that are constructed with the most interest, whether the absence of a site (a theatre, for instance, or the World Trade Center

buildings) or the absence of life. What narratives of absence ignore is the resilience of the creation and definition of what I call “disaster space,” newly significant physical and social spaces transformed by disaster, where grief can be performed and shared. Eyre writes, “in sociological terms, such areas are ‘sacred’ spaces, that is to say they are set apart as being of special significance and regarded as worthy of particular respect.”⁷³ The wreckage of the theatre became a disaster space for members of the public to gather and grieve together. The Brooklyn Market, “disused for some time” was another such place. As bodies arrived to the market throughout the day and darkness fell, “candles were inserted in thick slices of turnips and placed on the upturned breast of each poor remnant of humanity,” hoping to provide a little light for family members desperately searching for their missing, and feared dead, loved ones.⁷⁴

Within the groups that congregated at these disaster spaces, a man and several of his friends tried to enter the theatre and help Nevins and the firefighters. Stopped, the man spoke aloud to the crowd: “we are in much the same position as the poor wretches who perished last night,” he announced. “Only think how they must have felt, knowing the flames were close behind them, while they were helplessly involved in the mad rush for the stairway.”⁷⁵ Faced with this insight, those who overheard him “shuddered involuntarily.”⁷⁶ Eventually, a hush overcame the crowd, the size of which continued to increase past 5:00 PM, “continually augmented by men returning from business in New York,” by which time “movement became difficult in any of the streets leading to the scene of the conflagration.”⁷⁷ The crowd continued well past the streets, and into the buildings surrounding the theatre. Anywhere a view could be had, people found a way to get there, and windows and roofs soon became crowded by citizens observing the crew transporting bodies out of the building’s husk.⁷⁸ This treatment of the post-disaster paradigm as a shared social spectacle unto itself reinforces an interpretation of disaster as theatrical, and further

illustrates that this fire was not an issue solely for the deceased and for victims' family members, but for Brooklyn as a whole.

As with the space around the theatre, the morgues themselves became imbricated as significant sites of performance, as a procession of people made requests to the Coroner's office to get permits to view bodies, searching for loved ones, the theatrical unreality of disaster transformatively re-writing the space into a theatre, the spectacle of traumatic death made into a performance unto itself. Although the Coroner's office tried to control who was allowed into and out of these sites, it was impossible to do so with complete accuracy, and not everyone's presence in these morgues was exactly honest. One source notes,

A most shameful and vulgar feature of the inroad upon the Morgue was the vast number of women who, through mere curiosity, insisted upon entering the building. Women who were naturally nervous and hysterical forced their way in and risked good clothing and head-dress in their wild attempts to hover over the bodies. They began to sob and gesticulate long before they reached the hallway in which twenty-three blackened corpses were in line on the marble floor. When the women reached this scene, they shrieked as though bereft of all their kindred, but the majority of them were forced to admit they knew no one among the dead.⁷⁹

I would dispute the "shameful" and "vulgar" reading of these events as essentially ignoring the shared, social nature of grief. The notion that only victims, or family members of victims, could "own" the grief, denies the powerful sociological implication of disaster. That these performances, undertaken by "women who were naturally nervous and hysterical" were undertaken in a semipublic context suggests a compelling need to share, and through sharing, lessen, the unfathomable impact of the grief. Simply pointing to the fact that "they knew no one among the dead" suggests their grief as disingenuous and/or inauthentic. Disaster sociology recognizes the power and influence of traumatic transformation, not only on the site of the disaster, but also on the space around the theatre, and on the sociological functions of the

community, and on the individual. As Anne Eyre reminds us, “grief is fundamentally a social process,” that “generally requires collective participation.”⁸⁰

This participation, because collective and required, must be understood through the lens of performance. Grief expressed through collective participation in newly significant disaster spaces implies both actor and audience. In this case, the individual is traumatically transformed into a member of a survivor community, no matter how distant — or non-existent — their relationship to victims of the fire may have been. This theoretical vista re-empowers these performances of grief as vital contributions to the on-going negotiation of sets of disrupted social orders, and continues the generalized trend of newspapers and survivors constructing transformative narratives through the vocabulary of theatre and performance.

Internment and Honor of Her Dead

While the last section focused on the small scale, personal memory work that marked the congregation of humans around the disaster site and within newly significant disaster spaces, this section analyzes the larger-scale civic performances of grief that developed in the post-disaster paradigm, shared and significant rituals that perform symbolic evaluation of the disaster. According to Anne Eyre, a consideration of the symbolic power of these rituals shifts the rhetorical focus of memory-work from opportunities for the personal of sharing grief through social performance to the ways in which such rituals serve as sites of negotiating social loss and constructing new identities. Eyre writes about such rituals,

They highlight that in considering the nature and meaning of disaster rituals, we need to look at their deeper significance and purpose, and the transition they mark between one state of individual and social being and another. They suggest that disaster rituals might also be as much about social and political identity and change as about individual expressions of loss, change, and status.⁸¹

There was significant cooperation between the two levels of memory work in relation to the Brooklyn Theatre fire, most of which was undertaken without the tensions that typically mark these kinds of memorial operations. As with Richmond, there were some reactionary movements against the profession, but these movements were not nearly so pointed or cutting in their efficacy; nor were they entirely religious in nature. It seems clear that, by 1876, theatre was playing a vital role in the socioeconomic life of the city of New York, and while the disaster no doubt inspired a pattern of weak holiday season attendance for producers and managers, it also sparked an immediate rise in ticket sales for benefit performances. The Brooklyn Theatre fire is something of a success story of the creation of social memory, and this section argues this success is the result of a fundamental similarity in the narrative and rhetorical tropes created and distributed in the early post-disaster paradigm: everyone was focused on the potentially positive benefits of traumatic transformation.

Many of the issues the Brooklyn Common Council faced were similar to the difficulties faced after the fire at Richmond. By December 7th, the politicians had sprung into action, and the Brooklyn Common Council announced through Francis B. Fisher, the President of the Brooklyn Board of Aldermen, that the city would bear the cost of burying the dead “with appropriate ceremonies,” and that a team of Aldermen had been formed to “ascertain the number of bodies to be buried.”⁸² The New York City Board of Aldermen also adopted several resolutions pertaining to the fire and its victims, demonstrating that the grief experienced by the people of Brooklyn reached across the river:

Resolved, that the Common Council of the City of New York deplores the calamity that has recently visited our sister city in the almost unprecedented loss of life in the burning of the Brooklyn Theatre on the night of the 5th instant, and particularly sympathizes with the unfortunate families who, on the threshold of what probably will be an inclement Winter, have been deprived of those upon whom they had, in a great measure, depended for their support; therefore, further

Resolved, That his Honor the Mayor be and is hereby requested to call upon our citizens to contribute beyond all means in their power to alleviate the distress which will surely grow out of this appalling visitation.⁸³

Theatre professionals were also quick to take action. William E. Sinn of the Park Theatre proposed to the Common Council that “members of the theatrical profession in [New York] and Brooklyn” would “take steps towards raising \$20,000 to aid the authorities in such action as they might decide upon.”⁸⁴ The generosity of the theatrical community did not go unremarked; the editor of the *New York Clipper* published a ripping indictment of clergymen who tried to blame theatre’s sinful nature for the disaster, writing,

One lesson is to be drawn from the recent burning of the Brooklyn Theatre, and it is this: the chord of sympathy is touched never so quickly as when calamity falls upon a people. This is true, in a measure, of all classes; it is especially true of the stage...If we look back upon the long list of misfortunes which have befallen the theatre - and it is a list which carries with it a lesson that none can afford to disregard — we shall find that, in every instance where disaster or death has thrown a black shadow over the stage, there the spirit of charity has prompted a quick and generous response to the necessities of the hour...⁸⁵

The theatrical community’s primary response to the disaster came in the form of benefit performances that took place all over New York City. Understood as a form of memory work, these performances transformed theatre buildings into temporary social memorials to the victims of the disaster, and the theatre community undertaking these benefit performances can be read as a grass-roots survivor community. These performances began taking place in the run-up to Christmas, already a busy time for theatres, which only increased interest and attendance at performances. One general ticket would allow the bearer entry to any one of nine theatres putting on such performances, and the *Times* noted the disparity of attendance amongst the houses was due to this: “it was quite natural,” the *Times* reported on December 22nd, “that the purchaser thereof should select the houses that announced the most attractive programs.”⁸⁶ At Wallack’s Theatre, where a double bill of Thomas William Robertson’s play *Caste* and Thomas Haynes

Bayle's *Forty and Fifty* drew a crowd so large that "the house was literally packed until there was no longer standing room."⁸⁷

Meanwhile, at the Union Square Theatre, a house owned and operated by Brooklyn Theatre managers Palmer and Shook, many of the surviving cast members, including Claxton herself and Charles Thorne, produced *Led Astray*. The spectacle of this event, which one imagines was informed by the inherent danger of seeing survivors perform in a similar context to the disastrous event, caused such a great deal of interest that "hundreds were turned away unable to find room, the house being filled to its utmost capacity long before the arrival of the hour for raising the curtain."⁸⁸ Large interest was also generated at Booth's Theatre, where the intelligent, emotive, curly-haired blonde Lawrence Barrett reprised the titular role of *Richard III*, bringing in "at least three thousand five hundred persons, three thousand of whom succeeded in getting inside."⁸⁹ All proceeds of the theatrical events went towards the general relief fund for victims of the fire.

When considered against Richmond's quickly implemented and long-lasting ban of public shows and spectacles, the fact that theatre was used as a way to raise funds illustrates the economic importance of the profession to the city. Instead of immediately shutting and inspecting all houses for their safety, doors were thrown open and the public welcomed. While these benefits were obviously undertaken in the name of good, it is worth noting the irony that the popularity of some of these performances caused houses to be dangerously packed, reflexively ghosting the packed dress and family circles at the Brooklyn Theatre. This was noted in the *New York Times* on December 21st, when, at the meeting of the NYC Police Board,

President Smith and Commissioner Erhardt called attention to the fact that at two of the performances on Thursday, for the benefit of the sufferers by the Brooklyn Theatre fire, the theatre were overcrowded, and the law was violated by the placing of camp-stools in the aisles.⁹⁰

Given that the fire was so recent in spectators' memory, the potential danger of densely packed humans must have played across the minds of spectators and performers alike: the spectacle of disaster inherent within the theatrical memory work being produced. An interpretation of these contexts through Marvin Carlson's theory of ghosting provides one possible way to understand the seemingly giddy acceptance of danger. Carlson argues that theatre is defined by its relationship to memory and the performance of memory-work: "the physical theatre," he writes, "as a site of continuing reinforcement of memory by surrogation, is not surprisingly among the most haunted of human cultural structures."⁹¹ That humans would willingly return to these spaces, haunted by death from the temporal and geographical proximity of the ruined Brooklyn Theatre, suggests that it was this very danger — that the visceral thrill of knowingly placing themselves at risk — that formed part of the power and popularity of the experience. "Ghosting," Carlson continues, "presents the identical thing they have encountered before, although now in a somewhat different context. Thus, a recognition not of similarity, as in genre, but of identity, becomes a part of the reception process."⁹²

The benefit performances put on around Brooklyn and New York must be recognized as being ghosted by the deaths of the victims at Brooklyn. In returning to the theatre as a form of memory work, patrons illustrated the recursive nature of the powerfully traumatic transformation they had experienced. As the people of New York and Brooklyn, traumatically transformed by the disaster event, negotiated definitions of self in the post-disaster paradigm, they returned eagerly to the theatre in order to participate in these ongoing negotiations of identity, a process underscored by the mirroring effect produced in the reflection of constructing self within the context of the inherently constructed nature of theatre. This action can be understood through an analogy to a similar and contemporaneous phenomenon: the rhetorical indefatigability of spirit

that developed following the terrorist attacks on September 11th, a performative appeal to consequences: *if we don't attend the benefit performances, then the disaster has won.*

If, as I will argue in the next section, the religious response to the disaster evoked themes of positive sociopersonal transformation through encouraging survivors and mourners to perform their lives as monuments to the dead, the sociopolitical response was to raise and provide financial relief indiscriminately. The Brooklyn Theatre Fire Relief Association (BTFRA) was set up near Christmas, consolidating relief efforts of multiple sources into which money began pouring, and putting an end to a series of on-going discussions about the proper administration of the donations. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* opined, “it would be well for all of the agencies of relief to consolidate their work. They will do more and get more, because they will thereby not interfere with one another, and they will with one force touch society in all its grades.”⁹³ The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* published a request from Schroeder on December 11th, asking that,

The various committees, which have been organized for the purpose of soliciting and distributing aid, send one or more representatives to meet at the Mayor's office at 3 o'clock on Tuesday afternoon, 12th instant, so that there may be some concert of action, and that the work may be properly systematized.⁹⁴

That the relief effort was not “properly systematized” suggests dangerous bureaucratic incompetence and inefficiency, and the *Eagle* article also notes “Mayor Schroeder is extending relief in all cases where it is immediately demanded.”⁹⁵ The implication of the article — borne out by fact — was that money was being distributed to swindlers, people with no tragic relationship to the fire, but who saw in the fire an opportunity to cash in on the good intentions of the people of Brooklyn, New York and, indeed, the country. This is, perhaps, the dark side of grief as a shared social process: when everyone suffers, it can be difficult to establish with credibility who is deserving of the support of civic organizations. The BTFRA worked to find

ways to combat this indiscriminate and incompetent distribution of relief funds. Joshua Britton's article *Tragedy, Welfare and Reform: The Impact of the Brooklyn Theatre Fire of 1876*, argues,

The privatization of disaster relief in Brooklyn was part of a larger effort by municipal reformers in the 1870s to refine urban welfare, giving the administration of aid to upper-class "experts" with experience managing charitable organizations. Schroeder and his fellow reformers feared that if the machine-controlled Brooklyn Common Council were given charge of fire relief efforts, "Boss" Hugh McLaughlin would use the funds to buy political influence while the "virtuous poor" would be ignored. Given the scale of the disaster and the severity of the 1876-77 winter, Schroeder and his colleagues demanded that aid efforts be controlled by experienced administrators.⁹⁶

The BTFRA put into place a standardized process for doling out money to the bereaved: a home visit by a BTFRA representative, and subsequent reporting to the BTFRA of how the funds were used once awarded. Still, even this standardized process was not without criticism, and it's likely that attempts to weed out dishonest claims greatly complicated gaining relief for those who were actually suffering. Britton argues,

The very structure of the BTFRA seemed to be skewed against aid-seekers from the very beginning. This is perhaps best observed in the rigorous screening process that potential relief recipients were forced to undergo. First of all, most men were excluded from making a claim unless they could prove that they, through reason of age or disability, relied upon the income of their wife or child. Most men who applied for aid were summarily dismissed, revealing the BTFRA's lack of understanding of the economic structures of families in the city's working class. BTFRA clients needed first to provide the BTFRA with a reference attesting to their character and to the fact they lost a relative who provided for them and their family. Then, "their family circumstances were investigated by case workers who spared no pains to acquaint themselves with the character and needs of the numerous applicants and with the merits of their claims." If found worthy by the visitors, the Executive Committee would set a biweekly stipend appropriate for the family's lost income. Visitors kept copious notes about each home, and particular attention was paid to family arrangements and suspicions of alcohol consumption. The visitor for each ward would also be able to adjust the biweekly stipend at their discretion (and often did). These adjustments most frequently drew letters of complaint from aid recipients.⁹⁷

Arguably, in the BTFRA's discriminatory attitude towards male victims, a reading of a gendered social structure may be read. Through the indiscriminate and far-reaching disruptive power of fire, assumptions about gendered essentialisms are challenged and destroyed. In the

post-disaster scramble to re-construct systems of order and meaning, gender is an avenue through which those systems are negotiated and re-inscribed, perhaps best exemplified through the post-disaster re-writing of Richmond's Lieutenant Gibbon as a paragon of masculinity, even when the historical records don't support such claims. In the BTFRA's skeptical construction of male claims is the re-assertion of masculinity as a functional gender construct, and the implication of a weakened and helpless femininity, re-assertions of gendered essentialisms as valuable social systems of order held in the pre-disaster time period.

Despite the stringent application procedure, the BTFRA's overall influence for the benefit of the survivors was positive, and the committee dutifully doled out money for over two years. The group dissolved in late March 1879, and the final report published by Alfred Putnam, the Secretary of the Executive Committee, detailed both the "many ingenious attempts by impostors to obtain money from the committee, and... the method adopted for exposing the frauds."⁹⁸ The BTFRA oversaw the distribution of almost \$50,000 to sufferers, and took on the cost of meetings, investigations, and disbursement themselves. The final report of the BTFRA, coupled with the erection of the monument in Green-wood Cemetery, may be seen as a semiotic turning of the page, a symbol of the re-establishment of order following the disruption of the fire, a signal of the end of the disaster process. And just as the group dissolved, so, too, did concerns of the relative safety of theatre buildings in New York and Brooklyn, and beyond.

By December 7th, the city of Brooklyn's plan for internment of the dead was laid forth in a proclamation from Mayor Frederick A. Schroeder:

To the people of Brooklyn:

The interment in Greenwood Cemetery by the city authorities of the remains of those who perished on the night of the 5th of December in the fire at the Brooklyn Theatre will take place on Saturday, the 9th of December.

At 12 o'clock that day the funeral procession will be formed on Schermerhorn street, right resting on Flatbush avenue, and will move at 1 o'clock PM in the following order:

1. Police
2. Clergymen.
3. Hearses and other vehicles containing the bodies of the dead, escorted b the militia, under command of Major-general Thomas S. Dakin.
4. Relatives and friends of the deceased, who will present themselves in carriages.
5. Officials.

It is not expected that any of the relatives or friends will desire to join the procession on foot. It is recommended that those who wish to attend the ceremonies and pay their last respects to the dead, relatives and friends repair directly to the plot selected for the burial on Battle Hill, in Greenwood Cemetery, and there await the arrival of the funeral procession.

The route of the procession will be: Starting from the junction of Flatbush avenue and Schermerhorn street, through Flatbush avenue to Sixth avenue, Sixth avenue to Third street, Third street to Fourth avenue, Fourth avenue to Twenty-fifth street, Twenty-fifth street to the entrance of the Cemetery, and thence to Battle Hill.⁹⁹

As if in response to the somber and dour mood of Brooklyn, the brutal cold of December weather took a nasty turn as the week turned into the weekend, and the funeral processions got underway. On Saturday, as the bodies of most of the victims were interred, the storm hit the hardest, and powerful gusts of wind blew under an imposing grey sky, “gathering dust, gravel, and sifted snow” and “moan[ing] through the hole of the yet standing cupola” of the ruined theatre, “now and then tearing down a brick or two, and often threatening the whole of the structure.”¹⁰⁰ The gray weekend was marked entirely by Brooklyn “devot[ing] herself to the internment and honor of her dead.”¹⁰¹ In honor of the dead, the city was shut down on Saturday during the funeral, between 1 and 5 PM. The buildings in the city were physically transformed, as if the city itself were mourning along with its citizens: “the City Hall, Court-House, Post Office and other public buildings bore heavy drapings of crape. The theaters and many private establishments were also festooned with tokens of mourning, and flags at half-mast were to be seen in all parts of the city.”¹⁰²

The city had identified “seventy-six unrecognized bodies, all of which would be buried in the plot at Greenwood,” and an additional twenty-five bodies that were “recognized, but not

removed” from the wreckage of the theatre.¹⁰³ Fifteen other bodies, identified by family members, who “were absent or too poor to bury them were allotted separate graves, and interred at the city’s expense.” In addition to the “one hundred stained pine coffins with mountings of German silver,” “a considerable number of dead were buried privately by their friends or relatives.”¹⁰⁴ These bodies, representing all of the dead, were prepared for burial in Brooklyn’s Green-Wood Cemetery.¹⁰⁵ The fire had destroyed any ability to reliably read identity on the bodies of the victims, aside from superficial readings that focused on possible racialized differences. The *New York Tribune* reported this difficulty, writing, “it was very difficult to distinguish the remains of a white man from those of a colored person. The lips and hair, if any had been left, were about the only different features.”¹⁰⁶ As in Richmond, the only possible answer to the difficult question of burying the dead was through a “promiscuous grave” into which all of the available ashes, and the bones of the unidentified, would be placed.

The funeral procession “did not move until an hour after the appointed time,” owing to delays with prepping the bodies at the morgue, and it was closing in on two o’clock when,

The band of the 23rd Regiment began the funeral march, the sound of the weird, sobbing chords of the dirge caused tears to gather in the eyes of many men and women. The dread reality which the funeral embodied was felt with new force, as if the music had lifted a veil from the hearts of the spectators and a close bond of sympathy was established between the mourners and the crowd.¹⁰⁷

Hundreds lined the streets against the brutal and rising storm as the procession made its solemn march towards Green-Wood. “The number of people who were present.” Reported the *NY Tribune*,

Was large, and showed what a mighty hold upon the city’s heart the terrible calamity had taken. How large the crowd would have been had the air been more genial it is difficult to estimate; many think that the spectacle at the Lincoln and Greeley funerals would have been equaled if not surpassed in Saturday’s throngs.¹⁰⁸

As the wind whipped brutal snow and cold around the grounds of Green-Wood Cemetery, crowds gathered to watch as the victims were laid to rest. Green-Wood Cemetery was established as a National Historic Landmark in 2006, and was the brain-child of Henry Evelyn Pierrepont. The location, before the cemetery was established there in 1838, was most famous for being the location of the Battle of Long Island in August 1776, on what is known as Battle Hill. The site was, then, already marked by its association with death and carnage by the time the funeral procession reached the gates around 2:45 PM. As the procession neared the gates, “people who could not find standing room about the grave claimed the adjoining slopes, and even stood upon graves in their eagerness to see the procession,” enter the cemetery grounds.¹⁰⁹ The winter storm was so bad, and the wind blew with such force, that “the sermon at the grave was omitted and the other exercises were shortened to some extent on account of the suffering caused by the cold.”¹¹⁰ The bodies were laid to rest amongst the sounds of the howling winter winds and Brooklyn’s German societies singing, according to the *New York Tribune*, “Kullak’s ‘Abendlied,’ beginning ‘under the greenwood there is peace.’”¹¹¹

The monument that marks the significance of the loss at the Brooklyn Theatre fire stands today in the Green-Wood Cemetery. Erected and dedicated in November 1880, the monument stands at the center of the mass grave. When they were laid to rest that brutal December day, “the coffins were placed in a double row with the heads pointing inwardly,” in a “radiating double circle around” what is now the base of the monument.¹¹² That the city of Brooklyn was intending to build a monument was plain in the days immediately following the blaze: Mayor Schroeder and the Common Council were already announcing plans to construct the monument during the days following the fire, and in Richard Salter Storrs’ sermon, he makes reference to the plan to build it.¹¹³

In my initial research into the monument, I came to the Green-Wood Cemetery website, which lists the designer of the project as “unknown.” Through my research, I have identified the designer and architect. It’s worth noting that the contract to build the monument was awarded by the Brooklyn Common Council twice, indicating that the process of memorializing the dead was not an easy one. A December 2nd, 1879 article in the *New York Times* notes “Robert F. McKellar was awarded the contract yesterday by the Common Council for erecting a monument over the grave of the victims of the Brooklyn Theatre fire...the Monument is to cost \$3,839.”¹¹⁴ For reasons I am unable to identify — although I suspect that it was primarily a dispute about the cost — this deal fell through in relatively short order. By February, another call for builders was advertised in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, which read, in part,

MONUMENT IN GREENWOOD CEMETERY - DEPARTMENT OF CITY WORKS, Municipal Department Building, Brooklyn, February 5, 1880. Sealed proposals will be received at this office until Wednesday, the 18th day of February, 1880, at 11 A.M., for furnishing and erecting a monument in the plot of ground owned by the city in Greenwood Cemetery. All proposals to state a price for the monument (steps included) and a price for the monument without steps...
By order of the Common Council. - Dated Brooklyn, January 19, 1880.¹¹⁵

In March, it was announced in the *New York Times* that the contract had been re-awarded, this time to “ex-Alderman D.S. Arnott, which was the lowest bidder” at “\$2680.”¹¹⁶ This notice reinforces the idea that the original plan for the monument was abandoned due to financial issues, because the figure Arnott and the Brooklyn Common Council settled upon must have been the result of some negotiating back-and-forth. A *Brooklyn Union-Argus* report, published February 10th, 1879, on a Brooklyn Aldermen’s meeting, states,

The lowest bid for erecting a monument to the Brooklyn Theatre fire victims in Greenwood was \$5,830, which the appropriation is only \$2,000. Is enclosed a communication from D.S. Arnott, the second lowest bidder, claiming that as he drew plans by order of the Engineer and was entitled to pay, or that, he was therefore the lowest bidder...the Board of City Works was directed to readvertise for bids for the Brooklyn theatre fire monument, so as to keep within the appropriation.¹¹⁷

For as tragic as the fire was, there was very little attention paid in the news to the building and dedication of the memorial, and one of the only examples of newspaper coverage of the event is a brief mention in *The Herald* in November 1880: “the citizens of Brooklyn have erected in Greenwood cemetery a handsome monument to the memory of the victims of the Brooklyn theatre fire. One hundred and five unrecognizable bodies were buried in one lot in the cemetery.”¹¹⁸

Initially, I could find very little about David S. Arnott, who seems to have been a career politician, holding office in Brooklyn as the Assessor, in addition to his time as an Alderman. The passage in the *Union-Argus* confirms that he was the designer of the monument, as well as the contractor of its building and installation. When I located the above sources that provided information for the designer and architect of the memorial, I passed that information along to Jeff Richman, the resident Historian at the Green-Wood Cemetery. In a subsequently published blog, Richman provided considerable biographical information about Arnott, who ran a company with his nephew called “Monument Works” which was located near the Cemetery. Other information I was able to find helps to contextualize the design and construction of the monument.

The monument is huge, and stands upon a dark gray “tooled granite” pedestal consisting of “a plinth, sub-base, base, die and capital.”¹¹⁹ On this pedestal stands a large obelisk, and the entire construction raises thirty feet in the air. As it rises into the air, there are “stenciled bands of polished stylized leaves and vines” that run across the structure.¹²⁰ On each of the four sides of the base of the memorial are plaques that provide a stark narrative of the fire. Once, “a fence consisting of stone posts and a metal railing encompassed the plot,” where the unidentified bodies were laid to rest, which “provided a visual symbol of protection and repose within Green-Wood for those who perished,” but this fence no longer exists; it had been the source of some

vandalism before the cemetery removed it.¹²¹ Arnott was an active member of the Free Masons in the Brooklyn area, a member of the Greenwood Lodge.¹²² Given Arnott's association with Free Masonry, it is difficult not to read a Masonic, and, following the trail of history, an Ancient Egyptian, context into the Brooklyn Theatre fire monument.

It is generally believed that obelisks in Ancient Egypt were primarily built in honor of Ra, “the quintessence of all manifestations of the sun-god, permeating the three realms of the sky, earth and Underworld.”¹²³ Worshipped primary at Heliopolis — literally “Sun-City” — Ra is usually depicted “wearing the fiery disk of the sun on its head. The disk is surrounded by the body of the cobra-goddess, ‘coiled one,’ symbolizing the god’s power of delivering instant death.”¹²⁴ However, Ra’s power is not simply over death; Ra is also the creator, the one who “[came] into being at the beginning of time.”¹²⁵ Ra is also sometimes known as “the weeper” which refers to his creation of mankind, explained by means of a play on words in the similarity of the phonetics of the Egyptian words for “tear” and “man”: “the sun-god wept and from the tear (Egyptian ‘remy’) that fell to earth, there sprang man (Egyptian ‘remet’).”¹²⁶ In addition to their religious significance, some scholars suggest the obelisks served the practical purpose of indicating the passage of the hours of the day.¹²⁷

Benu is another Egyptian god, closely linked to Ra. Usually depicted as a bird, Benu was similarly worshipped at Heliopolis, and similarly self-generated into existence. It is often noted that Benu is a living manifestation of Ra’s *ba*, or soul, the essence of the sun-god. Benu’s named “appears to [mean] to ‘rise in brilliance’ or ‘shine’.”¹²⁸ It is through the Greek historian Heterodotus, who visited Egypt in the fifth century BC, that Benu’s more popular identity comes to us: Benu is the Phoenix, the mythological flaming bird that participates in a perpetual cycle of life, death, and resurrection. Free Masons date their fraternal association to stone mason guilds,

but identify the skill of Ancient cultures in the precise building of impressive projects, and the use of specific building tools by those cultures, as part of their heritage. John Weisse wrote, in 1880,

No Mason can look at the attitude of this group of Grand Master, Guide, Candidate, and Assistant, without realizing that, if there are Masonic institutions now, there were similar, if not identical ones, about four thousand years ago, in the land of the Pharaohs, and that modern Freemasonry had its prototype in the Masonic Temple of Set I and Rameses II, where applicants were initiated as Oriental and Occidental Masonic orders initiate now.¹²⁹

Given that Masons link themselves to the builders of Ancient Egypt, and that the Ancient Egyptians linked the obelisk to Ra and, by association, Benu/Phoenix, the obelisk at Greenwood is a strangely fitting monument to the victims of the Brooklyn Theatre fire. It rises over the grave of over a hundred unidentified victims of the blaze, a grim semiotic of Ra's divine power over life and death, and yet simultaneously promises that life will continue through the obelisk's association with the similarly fiery blaze of the Phoenix. I would also point to the possibilities of comparing this memorial to the Monumental Church in Richmond in order to suggest a way to read the shifting influence of religion over everyday life in America in the late-19th century.

Anne Eyre argues, "permanent memorials may focus on the importance of looking forward as well as back to an event."¹³⁰ It's difficult to read these simultaneous visions of the future and the past in the Richmond Theatre fire's Monumental Church, given the metaphorical and physical existence of the monument literally covering up the bodies of the dead. Understood against the fire and brimstone anti-theatrical rhetoric preached by clergy all over the country following the Richmond blaze, which necessarily insinuated that those who died in the fire of the building probably deserved it, given the inherently sinful nature that defined the theatre space, the Monumental Church seems best understood today as an example of an elite-level success in

controlling the narrative of the disaster. Brooklyn's monument to the victims of the fire, in comparison, seems almost subversive. For David S. Arnott, to memorialize the victims of the Brooklyn Theatre fire meant to construct a monument that demanded a temporal double vision, looking both backwards and forwards. The monument is a nexus of fire, and death, and the inevitable passage of time, and the transformative promise embedded within resurrection, on a blood-stained hill where a battle for the identity of the United State of America was fought.

Noblest Monument We Can Build

Concurrent with the civic funeral procession described in the previous section, a host of memorial services were held around Brooklyn — often identified as the City of Churches — in a variety of buildings, including traditional churches, like at the services for Murdoch and Burroughs, held in the Church of the Transfiguration, a popular religious spot for actors otherwise known as the Little Church Around the Corner. Because of the publicly shared nature of the grief of the citizens of Brooklyn, other buildings also had to be transformatively conscripted into religious use, and many theatres and music halls were also used to house services.

On the whole, these sermons can be read for their tendency to issue a challenge to the shortsighted religious narratives developed by clergy in the wake of the Richmond disaster. Theatres, and the disaster at the Richmond Theatre particularly, were constructed as “the resort of the most worthless character in existence,” and the institution of religion had to identify itself as an “enemy to the amusements of the theatre.” While before God spoke specifically to survivors to warn them of the calamity, now the focus of the clerical responses tended to call for civic mindfulness, and often issued critiques to the systems of reflexive modernization that contributed to the allowance of such an event to occur. The shift is not merely rhetorical, but can

be understood to reveal the transforming nature of the relationship between theatre and religion. In 1811, theatre was a den of iniquity, a waste of time that could be better spent praising God, and those themes, embedded in the fabric of society, operated powerful influence upon how the event was defined and remembered. By 1876, theatres were vital and contributory parts of the New York (and, indeed the American) economy and identity. Theatre had transformed itself, over the preceding sixty-five years, into the everyday lives of the rich and poor alike, into the fabric of the country itself, and, as such, the rhetoric of transformation powerfully suffused the memory-work of the Brooklyn Theatre fire.

Much of the rhetoric espoused on the nature of disaster, identity, and memory bears similarity to Paul Ricoeur's notion of the historiographical relationship between death and history:

At first sight, the representation of the past as the kingdom of the dead seems to condemn history to offering to our reading no more than a theater of shadows, stirred by survivors in possession of a suspended sentence of death. One escape remains: considering the historiographic operation to be the scriptural equivalent of the social ritual of entombment, of the act of sepulcher.¹³¹

In Ricoeur's concept of history, the act of writing history is the "scriptural equivalent" of entombing the dead; that is, to "do" history is to identify and participate in the analogical relationship between life and death, and the past and present and, in the act of participation, to transform the representation of the past through the social ritual of entombment; to be transformed by the sociological rituals relevant to the perpetual remembering the past and the dead. Brooklyn's religious remembrances called upon citizens to live through the act of remembering, to live as monuments to the victims of the fire.

The Brooklyn Academy of Music was the center of the memorial services, and attracted five thousand mourners.¹³² The service was opened by Mayor Schroeder, who announced that

the money raised for the relief of the survivors would go towards erecting the eventual monument on Battle Hill in Green-Wood Cemetery. Richard Salter Storrs and Joseph T. Duryea over saw the services, and their words were “received with outbursts of applause indicative of the feeling of the audience.”¹³³

Storrs, heavy-set, with thinning salt-and-pepper hair and voluminous white muttonchops, delivered a sermon specific to the idea of memory and identity, and of constructing disaster and the subsequent grief as shared social phenomena. He began by remarking upon the Brooklyn Academy of Music itself, stating “for the first time I believe in the history of this building it is filled by an assembly gathered by a great public disaster in the city in which we live. Henceforth it will have to us new associations, and it will seem to hang with funeral draperies.”¹³⁴ Storrs recognized the powerful effect of disaster to extend beyond the time and place of the event into a paradigmatic way of constructing meaning around newly significant disaster spaces and newly ritualized performances, to destabilize and transformatively re-write the reality of time and space around the event.

“We are not here to eulogize them,” Storrs told the assembled,

But to address ourselves to the work which is to be their real commendation. It is not to be in the monument that is to be erected in Greenwood. Erect that; let its foundations be solid; let its superstructure be of chase and elegant and solemn architecture, and let it tell to the eyes of the thousands who shall come after us in succeeding generations the story of the suffering, and the story of the love of the city called out by that suffering. Yes, but remember what the great German said, that the noblest monument we can build to our beloved is to wipe the tears of others, not to shed tears ourselves; and the greatest garland we can hang upon that monument is a garland of good deeds, and not wreaths of cypress and of flowers. Let us build a monument in our own hearts, in our large gifts, in our future lives to those who have died so suddenly, so sadly, and so heroically in the midst of us...Let us resolve that this shall be no passionate, spasmodic impulse passing away with the instant occasion, but that there shall be a liberality in our hearts and in our gifts that shall reach into the future and bless those who are now unconscious of their loss.¹³⁵

Storrs recognized the opportunity the fire presented the people of Brooklyn, not (or not only) to construct the narrative of the disaster as a result of God's Divine judgment, but also as an opportunity to live God's grace through action and, through these embodied actions, to create a monument beyond the bounds of physical time and space: a monument of human compassion. "Another monument which we are to build," he continued,

Is in our own character, remembering, as we are reminded by the writing upon the sky, the uncertainty of the present life and the open door, which, through Christ, is reserved for us into glory of the life beyond, and to live, everyone of us, nobler, more unselfish, more devout, and more divine lives, by reason of the tremendous impression of this event on all our households and on all our hearts. God grant that the city itself may take the impression of it and carry that through its future years. Man never is great really and morally until made so by the discipline of pain. A city never has achieved its perfect moral greatness until it bears suffering and profits by it, when the lessons of disaster enter into its moral life and make it serious, humane, and devout.¹³⁶

By suggesting a trajectory of the city of Brooklyn towards "perfect moral greatness" through the act of suffering traumatic transformation, Storrs asks the people to note and abide by the transformation that could potentially occur within each of them. Storrs seems to recognize the traumatic impression caused by the Brooklyn fire, which, by dint of its destructive capacity, paradoxically left a "tremendous impression" upon the houses and hearts of Brooklyn's people. In the tensions between presence and absence, Storrs argues that the fire can contribute towards Brooklyn's moral trajectory when the people negotiate their identity through the lens of traumatic transformation.

When he stood to deliver his own sermon, Joseph T. Duryea must have struck the audience as youthful in comparison to Storrs. At 44, Duryea was clean-cut, clean-shaven, lantern jawed and serious looking. Duryea attempted to speak across religious lines and along themes of humanism and social responsibility. It must have been difficult for him to set aside his Puritanical beliefs in the sinful nature of the theatre, and it is not hard to imagine the tension in his voice as he announced,

I speak not now as a minister of the Gospel. I speak not now as a Puritan, but this I say, that no man should open a place of entertainment of the people until he makes it safe for the people to gather in it. If we cannot have any sort of entertainment except at the peril of life, however inspiring it may be to the intellect, however exciting to the sensibilities, however ennobling to the character, we cannot afford to purchase it at the price of life.¹³⁷

However, in setting aside the beliefs relevant to his religious role, Duryea demonstrated recognition of the sociological implications of theatrical role playing, identifying himself not through his role as minister or Puritan, but as a human. This was obviously not a problem for the clergy members who responded with religious vitriol to the Richmond Theatre fire, and illustrates recognition of the potential for traumatic transformation to make significant contributions to a newly re-ordered society through the self-conscious election of performing the self.

At Hooley's Opera House, a performance space owned and operated by Richard M. Hooley in Brooklyn, David Inglis and Henry Ward Beecher offered sermons to a large and attentive audience.¹³⁸ Inglis noted that the disaster would, like all events, soon fade into oblivion, "just as the sea covers over the engulfed ship and leaves no scar upon its surface, so already the graves have received or are receiving their dead..." Far from forgetting the victims, though, Inglis echoed Storrs's sentiments on the relationship between disaster and personal and social transformation, saying, "let us embalm in our hearts the imperishable memory and the ineffaceable lessons of this dark and tearful day."¹³⁹ In calling for the people of Brooklyn to "embalm in our hearts the imperishable memory" of those lost in the Brooklyn blaze, Inglis can be understood, through Ricoeur's insight, to be asking the people in attendance to performatively live their history and, in living, to negotiate a path around the inevitable covering of the disaster by the metaphorical sea, to participate in the "social ritual of entombment" and, in the act of participation, to ensure a historical remembrance of the significance of the disaster.¹⁴⁰

It must have been the venerable Henry Ward Beecher, though, that most of the audience came to see, every bit the celebrity as anyone onstage at the Brooklyn Theatre the night of the fire. In the years leading up to the Civil War, Beecher made himself known for riding through the Bleeding Kansas terrain, buying and freeing slaves, and selling abolitionists rifles, sarcastically called “Beecher Bibles.” He was well known as a public speaker on national lecture circuits, and spoke with ease and humor. He was handsome, if a little-strange looking, somewhat bug-eyed and soft-jawed, Beecher swept his thinning, though still long, gray hair back behind his ears and deployed a penetrating stare.

Beecher began by noting the inherent (and ironic) meta-theatricality of the religious service taking place in a theatre, discussing the resultant tensions in terms of the visible markers of spatial transformation. “This is an unusual place for such an audience as this,” he joked lightly,

This is a place for amusement. These are strange actors on this platform. No such play was ever set upon these boards before. To-day we devoted to tragedy rather than frivolity, and no other place more befits it than this, for it celebrates that other tragedy in that other place of public amusement where, while they were attempting to amuse the passing hours, and refresh those overtaxed and burdened with care, behold! There came moving upon the stage the giant and fiery features of the tragedy which has filled the world with amazement.¹⁴¹

While other responses placed blame on the engineers and operators of the theatre, Beecher was more generous, and attributed the tragedy more to the idiosyncrasies of human behavior in disastrous contexts. “Let me say, in the first place,” he said,

My heart has no blame for the builder nor for the proprietors of the building...my friends spoke as though churches, theaters, and public buildings could be constructed so as to avoid the possibility of the loss of life. Find me a man that has control of human nature, that can restrain human nature, and I will believe such a building may be made; but you throw a thousand men upon the open prairies and let a panic arise, and regardless of everything but their own safety they will, many of them, trample each other down. You may broaden your stairways, you may make every window a door, you may open the dry walls themselves, and when an audience is panic-stricken, there will be slaying in the midst.¹⁴²

Still, Beecher, allowed, the people of Brooklyn should accept responsibility for the things they could do, the transformations they could make to building codes and designs, but admitted that, as much as they could do, “we cannot do everything.”¹⁴³

While many of these responses seem considerably more measured than the invectives leveled against the theatre in the post-disaster paradigm of 1811 Richmond, not every religious response was as polite or productive, as revealed by a December 16th article in the *New York Clipper*, which noted,

The appalling calamity which took place at the Brooklyn Theatre on the night of Tuesday, Dec. 5, when that house was destroyed by fire, and some three hundred lives were lost, is still the all-absorbing topic here and elsewhere, and it has already afforded the pulpit the opportunity to point a moral, seeing that the disaster occurred in “a playhouse” and our pious friends are apt to term the theatre.¹⁴⁴

The *Clipper* further argued that the fire would continue to be co-opted by clergy as an illustration of the sinful nature of the theatre, and of the ultimate fate that awaited all who attended theatrical amusements, whilst simultaneously identifying the hypocrisy of the clergy to not apply the same logic to church fires; the article references the brutal 1863 Church of the Company fire in Santiago, Chile, which was often used as a counter-point to religious arguments about the Brooklyn Theatre fire being an example of God’s justice:

That [the Brooklyn fire] will serve many a similar purpose hereafter may be accepted as true; for, while fire and loss of life are liable to occur in the church as well as in the theatre, but little comment is made when the former is the scene of conflagration or disaster; and yet, by a similar calamity to that which was thrown a gloom over Brooklyn, some two thousand lives were lost during an alarm of fire and subsequent panic in a church in South America a few years ago.¹⁴⁵

An article a week later detailed stage folks’ tendency towards generosity in times of disaster, and argued,

It strikes us that, in the light of what has happened during the past two weeks, those bilious expounders of the gospel who have hitherto delighted in denouncing the playhouse as the legitimate off-spring of the devil might learn a lesson of lasting value. We remember how, not many months ago, a certain preacher over in Brooklyn, whose

theology is of that strongly gymnastic type which flourishes best, if not exclusively, in the City of Churches — we remember how this harlequin of the pulpit stood up and brazenly declared that every man and woman who trod the boards was doomed to everlasting torments in the world to come. Precisely where or when this preacher possessed himself of such momentous information does not appear; but that he was morally certain of the truth of what he proclaimed we have no doubt... The open-handed generosity of stage-people has become proverbial. And it is to be remembered that this generosity is not beyond any means confined to the necessities of their own associates. At the burning of the Richmond Theatre, which, with the single exception of the recent terribly calamity, resulted in a greater loss of life than was ever known in this country from the burning of a ‘playhouse’ — at the time of that sad occurrence, the quick and generous response which went from theatre-circles was a matter of general comment and surprise.¹⁴⁶

While it seems clear that, in the sixty-five years separating the Richmond and Brooklyn fires, the relationship between theatre and religion was improved, it’s similarly clear that such improvement was an on-going process. The disaster, for a short time, offered actors and clergy alike the opportunity to bridge the gap between their separate existences as a way to re-establish an order in a disrupted life. This, obviously, wasn’t always successful.

The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* remarked upon this tension on December 9th, writing,

The work of memorial service and the work of charitable relief are proceeding within the same time but at an unequal pace in this city. We are secular, and, if the reader pleases, cynical enough to believe that the work of charitable relief is the most important in its object, the most commendable in the spirit which characterizes its arrangements, and the most felicitous and representative in the propositions it makes to the public, as well as altogether the most impressive in the clientage it appeals for. The credit for such progress as the work of relief has made must be assigned by the facts in the case to the theatrical people, and to the citizens who have acted with them.¹⁴⁷

The same article goes on to accuse Schroeder of not acting quickly enough to call for political fundraising for the relief of the victims and sufferers of the fire, and notes the tension inherent in the spectacular performances of mourning the dead. “The thing to do,” the article argues, “is to relieve the living, not to arrange for a spectacle over the dead... the gospel of work is needed much more than the gospel of words.”¹⁴⁸ Embedded within this argument is the *Eagle*’s recognition of the necessity of following the trends of transformative social change that

resulted from the disaster: in calling for a shift of focus from throwing money at a lavish funereal process towards providing relief to the survivors, the *Eagle* furthered the interpretive framework of transformation as significantly marking the Brooklyn disaster process.

Part II, Chapter 7: Direct Results of This Experience

Genius of the Theatre

While narratives of the Richmond fire ascribe the occurrence to God, as noted above, instead of the fire and brimstone rhetoric of God's justice being done to the sinful patrons of the theatre, most responses to the Brooklyn Fire concentrated on the themes of positive social and personal transformation. The theme of transformation was most often understood as providing a trajectory toward a humanistic approach to re-establishing order in the wake of the disaster: to live one's life as monuments to those lost in the flames meant to contribute productively to the newly ordered society. The use of transformation as a post-disaster paradigmatic way of constructing meaning contributed significantly to what evidence would be accepted into the historical records about the event, even when such evidence was identifiably false. In this chapter, I provide two examples of the blurring of the lines of fiction and reality in the claims made relevant to the Brooklyn Theatre fire.

First, I analyze claims made by the MacKaye family about Steele MacKaye's alleged attendance at the theatre the night it burned down, and how this experience contributed to his professional interest in technologies of hazard mitigation and fire safety. Next, I consider how the fire stuck to and defined *Two Orphans* star Kate Claxton's life and contributed to a re-organization of her personal history that has passed into accepted fact about the fire. These urban mythologies, I argue, come to be accepted as fact through their tendency to abide by and reinforce the themes of positive personal transformation that marked memory-work of the Brooklyn Theatre fire, in a way that mirrors (and provides a generalizable pattern for) Susan Archer Weiss and Mary Gibbon Carter's re-writing of James Gibbon's actions the night of the

Richmond Theatre fire to better suit the religious and fatalistic rhetoric that dominated Richmond's post-disaster paradigm.

In *Re-Writing a Living Legend*, T. Joseph Scanlon notes some "accounts are credible because one meshes with another...other accounts do not mesh so easily." The story about MacKaye's attendance is one such story that does not mesh so easily; the preponderance of evidence about the Brooklyn Theatre fire leaves little room for belief of MacKaye's attendance. I argue that MacKaye was most likely not present at the theatre that night, and that the purported inspirational link between the Brooklyn Theatre fire and MacKaye's invention of the fold-down chair is an example of a kind of traumatic mythologizing unique to the essentially contested nature of cultural and memorial production in the post-disaster paradigm. Theatre disasters are particularly susceptible to the creation, injection, acceptance, and use of fictional narratives as evidence, owing to the fact that theatre is always already imbricated in a blurring of the lines of reality and fiction.

However, I am not arguing that, when these traumatic and fictional mythologies are identified in the historical records, they should be dismissed. Rather, understood through the interpretive lens of disaster sociology, these kinds of fictional narratives prove useful in providing a method for understanding the sociological impact of disaster's memory-work. Viewed this way, traumatic mythology can be positioned as making a substantial contribution to understanding "the political encounter between grass-roots and elite-level, political 'processing' of" the disaster event."¹⁴⁹ It is not, then, the relative truth or fiction of Steele MacKaye's presence or absence at the Brooklyn Theatre that concerns me, but what the inclusion of the account of his presence in records about the event reveals about the politics of memory in the post-disaster paradigm. What inspired the creation of this fictional account, and how did it pass

into accepted history? As T. Joseph Scanlon argues, “the fact that something is not credible does not make it useless,” and, “dramatic events inspire fiction, some of it autobiographical.”¹⁵⁰

Numerous scholars, owing at least partially to the fact that Steele MacKaye’s son wrote it, have called into question the primary source claiming MacKaye’s presence at the Brooklyn Theatre the night it burned down. *Epoch: The Life of Steele MacKaye, Genius of the Theatre*, also provides what appears to be the sole piece of evidence of MacKaye’s attendance at the Brooklyn Theatre the night it burned down: a letter from the composer Edgar Stillman Kelley. Percy MacKaye reports,

...In December of 1876, my father barely escaped with his life from a terrible fire disaster which shocked the whole country - the burning of the Brooklyn Theatre with tragic loss of human lives: an event which stirred him to devote much time to the invention of various devices for fire-safety in theaters, used and perfected later in his own theaters and productions. Of this experience, Edgar Stillman Kelley, the Americana composer, has written this account.¹⁵¹

There are examples of problematic claims and factual misinformation in Kelley’s description of the theatre. Kelley writes, “A most startling tale was told to me by Steele MacKaye of the burning of the Brooklyn Theater. He related how, in order to hear Kate Claxton in the *Two Orphans* (the house being sold out) he had obtained a seat among the musicians in the orchestra.”¹⁵² That Steele MacKaye would have been unable to purchase a seat — “the house being sold out” — is simply untrue. The parquet had plenty of available seating, a fact reiterated by numerous witnesses, including Edward B. Dickinson, who was sat five rows from the stage, and who reported that, while the family and dress circles were quite packed, “the lowest part of the theatre was not more than half full.”¹⁵³

Other claims made by Kelley that strain credulity given the preponderance of evidence provided by survivors include the failure of members of the orchestra to note a non-musician sitting among them. Kelley writes that, noticing the fire, MacKaye, “retaining his presence of

mind...stepped over the rail and proceeded quietly up the aisles to notify the ushers to keep perfect order and dismiss the audience at once. But he was anticipated by a yell from somewhere, and an uproar ensued in which he soon found himself without a coat.”¹⁵⁴ Lengthy and intensive investigations into the fire produced no survivors’ reports about a man walking calmly up the aisle to ask ushers to dismiss the audience.

Kelley relates MacKaye’s memory of the fire: “‘In an instant,’ said he, ‘an insidious, stifling gas penetrated our lungs, creating a desire for air and freedom, and a struggle for animal existence forced the weaker to the wall.’”¹⁵⁵ The description of the sudden onset of “an insidious, stifling gas” penetrating the audiences’ lungs ignores the fact that four of the actors of *Two Orphans* stood onstage and loudly and repeatedly implored the audience to remain calm and quiet for several minutes after the fire was discovered – a significant length of time for a fire that lasted approximately thirty minutes – most of whom were able to make their way to safety. Additionally, most sources agree that exit from the parquet seating area was quick, effective, and relatively safe, with few or zero deaths, as opposed to the “struggle for animal existence,” described by Kelley. The majority of violence and death that occurred took place in the lobby, and on the poorly designed stairs, as family and dress circle patrons tripped and created a deadly logjam of humanity.

Finally, there is the point that, in early December 1876, Steele MacKaye was devastated over the death of his sister Sarah MacKaye Warner, just two days earlier on December 3rd, something that might have made him disinclined to attend a routine melodrama. These points, taken together, cast a great deal of doubt on Kelley and Percy MacKaye’s argument that Steele MacKaye was attendance at the theatre that night. Still, Kelley argues that “As MacKaye was a rare combination of the artistic temperament and the practical inventor, one of the direct results

of this experience was his invention of processes to fireproof scenery, as well as his folding safety-seat of theaters.”¹⁵⁶ This is a claim repeated by J.A. Sokalski’s 2007 *Pictorial Illusionism: The Theatre of Steele MacKaye*, as well as Richard Mangrum’s thesis on MacKaye, *Steele MacKaye: Inventor-Innovator*.¹⁵⁷ Sokalski writes,

the destruction of the theatre by fire, his own good fortune to escape, and the great loss of life inspired MacKaye to invent practices that would not only prevent such accidents but also convince people that safe theatres could be built. His initial foray into this area dealt specifically with the control and avoidance of fire...¹⁵⁸

He cites MacKaye’s article in *The National Review*, “Safety in Theatres” as evidence of MacKaye’s newfound interest in theatre safety.¹⁵⁹

Perhaps the most convincing argument of MacKaye’s absence from the theatre that night is his own silence on the matter. In the aforementioned article, Steele MacKaye makes reference to the Brooklyn Theatre, writing,

Such terrible catastrophes as the burning of the Brooklyn Theater, and the Opera Houses at Nice and Vienna, sufficed for a time to direct the attention of fire departments to the faulty interior arrangements of theaters, but the earnestness of this attention has been so transitory, and the investigations that have followed have been so superficial, that it is very doubtful if there exists to-day a single place of amusement in the United States devoid of danger from fire, or one where safety, if fire occurred, would not prove due to good luck far more than to any proper preparation on the part of the management, for the accidents that fire is too liable to cause.¹⁶⁰

He later writes extensively about the fire, but none of what he writes seems informed by anything more than a careful study of newspaper articles. If MacKaye was, indeed, in attendance that night, he completely extricates himself from any narrative of the disaster. He writes that the fire “illustrated with appalling power the horrible possibilities that may overtake a crowd in buildings devoted to amusement.” He contends the blaze, “converted over three hundred gay and joyous men and women into charred and horrible corpses,” and that the flames “burst through the proscenium arch, pouring vast volumes of smoke into the auditorium, where the audience,

imprisoned by the pack in the aisles, and by the obstructing barricades formed by the seats, were suffocated before they could reach the doors, where air might have been obtained.”¹⁶¹ These claims are verifiable by cross-referencing other sources about the event, but, given the argument that MacKaye witnessed the disaster process unfold first-hand, these claims are also extremely vague. It is, at the very least, curious that MacKaye wouldn’t offer any first person account of the fire if indeed he had been there.

That the Brooklyn blaze affected him is doubtless; he refers to it as “a revelation of the dangers prevalent in our own community.”¹⁶² And the fire may indeed have been the inspiration for his penchant for theatrical innovation to spark. MacKaye was no doubt interested in developing new technologies to increase safety in theatre, and to increase the feeling of customer safety while attending theatre. However, while he paid heed to the danger fire could cause, his primary concern was not related to the kind of sudden conflagratory disaster modeled by the Brooklyn Theatre. MacKaye was centrally concerned with the more insidious long-term dangers of poorly ventilated, and poorly managed theatres:

It is a fact worthy of special emphasis, that the immediate cause of death in disaster of this kind is asphyxiation, the flames not reaching the victims until a comparatively long time after they have fallen waiting and lifeless from the inhalation of smoke.

The primary danger at the Brooklyn Theater lay in the inflammable nature of the scenic department, behind the proscenium wall, but this danger was enormously reenforced by the character and arrangement of the seats, and the insufficient number of aisles allowed for the exit of the audience.¹⁶³

In the same article, he writes that, immediately following the fire, he “assisted [Dion] Boucicault in making certain experiments in the fire-proofing of scenery at Mr. Wallack’s theatre.”¹⁶⁴ A December 20th article in the *New York Tribune* confirms the experiment, although it does not mention MacKaye’s involvement:

Lester Wallack on Monday sent a communication to the Fire Commissioners, making them to witness an experiment which he proposed to make at this theater by saturating the scenery with some incombustible material and then applying fire to it. He declared

that the light scenery would not ignite. The Commissioners, in reply, expressed the fear that there might be some danger to the building in the experiment through possible accident, but stated that if they were assured to the contrary they would place no obstacle in the way of the trial. Mr. Wallack then offered to put the experiment under the charge of the Fire Department, and stating that a preliminary test would take place at his theater yesterday afternoon.

The Commissioners visited the theater about 3 p.m. yesterday and found Dion Boucicault, who has been making a study of preparations for rendering stage machinery fire-proof, in readiness to show them the result of his experiments. Two pieces of scenery had been prepared by being previously wetted with the solution adopted by Mr. Boucicault. A large hose had also been attached to a gas-pipe, and the flame which came from the nozzle was nearly a foot in thickness, and over five feet long. This flame was directed against the prepared scenery, which do not ignite. The fire was then held steadily against one portion of the scenery until it crumbled under the intense heat. When the flame was removed, a circular hole remains, but the edges still refused to burn. The Commissioners expressed much satisfaction with the result. A public experiment will be tried at 1 p.m. To-day, when a larger number of city officials and many citizens are expected to be present. In conversation with a reporter yesterday afternoon Mr. Boucicault said that he had endeavored to introduce fireproof scenery into the London theaters 16 years ago, but was unsuccessful in his attempt owing to the lack of interest which the plan aroused.¹⁶⁵

Of course, MacKaye's absence from the reporting of this act does not mean he was not involved in the experiment in some form, and it similarly does not mean that he was entirely absent from the private display of fire-proofing technology.

In these transformative reality reconstructions is the revelation of the desire to construct the disaster as valuable through suggesting that the deaths of three hundred people were not in vain. If MacKaye (and, indeed, others) learned something and *applied* such learning through the lens of disaster, and, through the application of new knowledge, increased the safety of theatre for play-goers, the disaster could become a vehicle for social value. This idea points fundamentally to the sermon delivered by Richard Salter Storrs, in which he called for survivors to live their lives as a monument to those who died. Perhaps MacKaye's longest-lasting, and most influential invention that (ostensibly) shares its genesis with the flames of the Brooklyn Theatre fire is the 1884 invention of the folding chair. "There is not one [theatre], at present, in which the arrangement of the seats themselves is not a source of danger," MacKaye wrote,

For the real difficulty in emptying a theater is not caused so much by the limitation of space allowed for the exits as by the fact that the passage to the doors is blocked by the seats themselves, and by the wedging of the crowd, in their haste to escape through the aisles...for in the rush of a crowd many are crushed to death, or rendered insensible by being pressed against the present immovable rows of chairs or benches.¹⁶⁶

A simple contraption designed to “provide a broad aisle in every direction when the chair was folded and to provide a seat just as comfortable and stable as an ordinary chair,” this device has revolutionized theatrical space, and the audience’s experience within theatrical space.¹⁶⁷

While the device was much more complicated than contemporary folding chairs, the function would be more or less the same: when the chair was empty, the seat and arms would lift and fold themselves against the chair-back portion; when it was inhabited, the weight of the spectator would depress the chair until it was “held in place by a lock device until it was released by a patron.”¹⁶⁸ This device ensured the creation of much wider aisles of seating, allowing, in turn, for much quicker egress in the event of a disaster.

The arguments MacKaye makes in *Safety in Theatres* are strong, common sense points for ensuring patron safety, and would have value without any direct, personal connection to the Brooklyn blaze. He advocates proper training and organization for stage employees and for legally required installation of water sprinkler systems; common sense, effective measures to prevent the spread of theatre fires. It may have been enough to identify the fact that MacKaye’s interest stemmed primarily from his own financial interests — the Brooklyn fire, it is said, “had the effect of, for a time, almost emptying every place of amusement.”¹⁶⁹

It is through the rhetorical and narrative tropes constructed and used by elite-level religious processing of the Brooklyn fire that fiction becomes accepted as fact: if MacKaye learned something and *applied* such learning through the lens of the Brooklyn disaster, if he participated in increasing the safety of theatre for play-goers, then the account of the inspiration and invention of the folding chair can be understood as memory-work undertaken in accordance with

the post-disaster paradigmatic environment of sociopersonal improvement. By positing MacKaye's creation as a monumental act inspired by the disaster at Brooklyn, the fiction of MacKaye's attendance did not challenge, but re-enforced, the elite-level processing of the post-disaster paradigm and, through the act of re-enforcement, entered into official historical narratives about the event. In this example, the memory work of traumatic mythology served to illustrate the political encounter between elite-level and grass-roots memory work. By reinforcing the prevailing rhetorical tropes of positive transformation used by religious responses through the act of creative inspiration undertaken in the context of disastrous destruction, Steele MacKaye, against compelling evidence to the contrary, despite the lack of factual correctness in his narrative, suddenly found himself at the Brooklyn Theatre the night it burned down.

At least, that's what he says. Because, after all, MacKaye was a theatre artist of considerable talent and renown, and even if he wasn't at the theatre that night, isn't the story of his inspiration for the fold-down chair more satisfying if he was?

Kate Claxton: Fire Jinx!

Kate Claxton may have escaped the Brooklyn Theatre with her life, but it's fair to say that she never truly escaped the Brooklyn Theatre. The disaster stuck to her and colored the spectatorial reception and interpretation of her body for the remainder of her career. However, the fire also had the bizarre effect of transforming her past, as well: a considerable amount of writing about Claxton and the Brooklyn fire tries to assert a link between her forebears and theatre fires as a way to identify a pattern within, and make sense of, the traumatic transformation associated with the destruction by fire of a theatre. A December 30th article in the *Chicago Tribune* articulated this unfortunate effect of the disaster, writing, "the name of Kate Claxton will be inseparably connected with the Brooklyn disaster."¹⁷⁰ J.K. Curry's 2003 article

Kate Claxton: Fire Jinx re-enforces this idea: “Claxton’s every theatrical success was intertwined in the public imagination with her connection to the catastrophic Brooklyn Theatre fire.”¹⁷¹ This section examines how the theme of traumatic transformation that was advanced early in the post-disaster paradigm, and which came to define the production of memory related to the Brooklyn Theatre fire, re-wrote Kate Claxton’s body as a nexus of fiction and reality.

Born in 1848 as Kate Eliza Cone, Claxton’s paternal grandfather was Spencer Houghton Cone, the well-known Baptist preacher who had once served as Chaplain of the United States House of Representatives, and who had enjoyed enormous popularity and influence as a man of God. Like Murdoch, acting was in Claxton’s blood: that same preacher grandfather had spent much of his youth in the American theatre circuit, beginning at the Chestnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia in an 1805 production of *Mahomet*, alongside some of the most important actors of the era, including Joseph Jefferson. Cone later called this enterprise “a moment of desperation” and wrote that his stage career was “inimical to the wishes of my mother...in direct opposition to my own feelings and principles; but it was the only way by which I had a hope of extricating myself from my pecuniary embarrassments.”¹⁷²

Her father had some stage experience, as well; Spencer Wallace Cone was a poet, a lawyer, and a Civil War officer, but had also dabbled in amateur playwriting and even occasionally trod the boards himself. Kate followed in the paternal family’s profession, but her looks favored Josephine Martinez, her Spanish mother: pretty, broad faced and full figured, with a prominent nose, Claxton, in the course of only six years, had become one of the better recognized and respected actresses’ on the stage. She was the undisputed star of *The Two Orphans*; Louise, the blind, pathetic, rag-clad titular orphan girl, was her signature role, one she had originated two years previous at that play’s American debut on December 21st, 1874 at the Union Square

Theatre, where it had run continuously until recently being transferred to Shook and Palmer's Brooklyn Theatre.

Reports differ as to what happened to Claxton after she escaped the burning theatre. The *Daily Eagle* asserted that Claxton,

Had been hurried into the [police] station house by an Eagle reporter, who plucked her from the crushing throng. She was in the stage costume of the blind girl. Her light brown hair was wildly disheveled, the stage paint was on her cheeks and brow, giving her a ghastly pallor in her fright that worked sympathetically on those who saw her. She shivered in a patched and tattered skirt, and in a slightly waist, through which her arms hung bare. She was taken into the Captain's room and given a seat. Her manner was distracted, and it was sometime before she could find words. When she had been partially calmed, she said eagerly, "Where is Murdoch? Has anyone seen Murdoch?" No one had...her next outburst was "Oh, my seal skin sacque, I wish I had taken that..."¹⁷³

A report from the *New York Herald* later places Claxton at the Pierrepont Hotel, to which she made her way following her short stay at the station house, where she received the reported "courteously, and signified her willingness to tell the readers of the *Herald* all she knew of the circumstances surrounding the calamity."¹⁷⁴ The *New York Times* suggests that Claxton was there with fellow performer Ida Vernon and, contrary to the *Herald* report, notes that Claxton was "extremely agitated by the scenes [she] had witnessed," and only managed to "control herself sufficiently to tell the...story, in a somewhat disjointed fashion, but with a great deal of unconscious dramatic force."¹⁷⁵ Other sources suggest that Claxton was found in the very early morning hours of December 6th wandering City Hall in Manhattan, badly burned and unable to recall taking the ferry from Brooklyn.¹⁷⁶

Immediately following the fire, Claxton and the other actors that had lined themselves across the stage were hailed as heroes of the fire, but this narrative, too, changed as time went on. A December 6th article in the *New York Times* quotes Claxton as saying "the body of the house was not very well filled, but the gallery was crowded. I am convinced that our action prevented a panic, and enabled people near the doors to get out without being pressed upon by those from the

front seats.”¹⁷⁷ Just under a decade later, Claxton reflected upon her actions in a very different way:

We thought we were acting in the best in continuing the play as we did...but the result proved that it was not the right course...the audience should have been calmly informed that indisposition on the part of some member of the company or some unfortunate occurrence behind the scenery compelled a suspension of the performance, and they should have been requested to disperse as quietly as they could.”¹⁷⁸

Claxton’s presence began to make audiences uncomfortable. A matinee, Christmas-day performance of *Two Orphans* in Washington, DC at the National Theatre was interrupted when audience members misheard a cry of “fight!” for “fire!” “The doors were opened and many rushed from the building,” the *New York Tribune* reported. “Three or four persons were bruised, but no one was seriously hurt.”¹⁷⁹ The *Chicago Tribune*’s December 30th article on the event in DC sensationalizes the event even further:

In the twinkling of an eye a panic was created by the greater portion of the men, women, and children in the audience jumping to their feet, crying and screaming, and but for the presence of cool heads and brave hearts a general stampede would have occurred, and a frightful loss of life ensued...Louise, the blind girl, regained her sight for a time, and, with outstretched arms, appealed to the audience to keep their seats.¹⁸⁰

When Claxton appeared before the curtain to explain what had happened, “deafening applause greeted this announcement, and order was again restored.”¹⁸¹ Only adding to Claxton’s inability to extricate herself from the disaster was her continued unlucky relationship to fires in public buildings. Less than six months after the Brooklyn blaze, on April 11th, 1877, Claxton found herself staying at the luxury Southern Hotel in St. Louis when it, too, burned to the ground. Her identity as “fire fiend,” “fire witch,” or “fire jinx,” was fixed.¹⁸²

Joke cycles that develop in the post-disaster paradigm can come to operate powerful influence on the writing of history. In Claxton’s case, the joke cycle that developed around her unfortunate relationship with fire disasters played out in the press as cartoonists and journalists

began to crack jokes at her expense. One of the first examples of this comes from a May 1877 article in the *Chicago Tribune*, which read,

A New York writer, improving upon some of his predecessor, says that Miss Kate Claxton was in the Richmond Theatre when it burned in 1811. She may have been there in spirit, as she doubtless was at the burning of London and the firing of the Ephesian dome, somewhat earlier; but, as the gallant defenders of woman's rights in respect to their age, we deny that she was bodily present at Richmond in 1811. She confesses only to thirty summers.¹⁸³

This passage reveals that the joke cycle about Claxton was already well-enough underway that the *Tribune* could report upon it with the understanding that the reader would be “in on the joke.” Given that the tone of the short piece is jocular, it seems obvious that the comment was meant in good fun. However, Curry argues that, from this short remark, a transformative re-writing of history sprang up around Claxton as “later writers attempted seriously to add it to Claxton's dossier through the story of her grandfather, Spencer Houghton Cone, who had been a professional actor for a short period before becoming a Baptist minister.”¹⁸⁴ Curry further notes that the primary antagonist of this trend was Joseph Daly, who, while writing a biography of his brother Augustin, suggested “it was the singular experience of her grandfather in a similar disaster, the burning of the Richmond Theatre in Virginia, had turned him from the stage to the pulpit.”¹⁸⁵ Indeed, this mythology shows up in many narratives of Cone's development from player to puritan, even though there is no other evidence for it, and plenty of evidence against it.

The Brooklyn fire and a nasty sense of humor followed Claxton for the rest of her life. The fire was often used as a tool for contextualizing her public romantic struggles. When she separated from her husband, Isidor Lyon, in April 1877, a report read, “Miss Kate Claxton escaped from the Brooklyn fire in gauzy apparel, and from the Southern in light attire, and the ground of her husband's suit for a divorce is said to involve similar misfortune of dress,” suggesting sexual impropriety on Claxton's behalf. When she was subsequently married to

Charles Stevenson, and became pregnant, another report joked, “the story that Kate Claxton’s baby is marked with the figure of a rotary fire engine is probably a base falsehood.”¹⁸⁶ That these jokes gained considerable cultural and historiographical purchase on Claxton’s life reveals the powerful social fears and anxieties that contributed to the effective transformation of the spectacle of Claxton’s body and identity. It must have seemed unthinkable that so much conflagratory violence could converge around one person. Joke cycles, like the ones that developed around Claxton, suggest the danger of taking anything too seriously — including a disaster itself.

When Claxton died on May 5th, 1924, articles covering her death linked her directly to the Brooklyn Theatre fire. When the *New York Times* wrote about her death, they called her “the famous actress of a generation ago,” illustrating that Claxton had long since passed from the public’s memory. The funeral service for Claxton was held at the Church of the Transfiguration in Brooklyn, the same Little Church Around the Corner where Burroughs and Murdoch were laid to rest, and she was buried in Green-Wood Cemetery. That Claxton followed in the same path of death travelled by her *Two Orphans* co-stars, and the other victims of the Brooklyn Theatre, seems appropriate: although she had successfully and boldly escaped from the Brooklyn Theatre on the night of December 6th, saving, in the process, the lives of Maude Harrison and Mary Farren, Claxton never truly escaped the blaze. It disrupted her life, transformed her past and future, re-wrote her body, and defined her for the rest of her career, for the rest of her life, until, even in death, in eternal rest, Claxton couldn’t escape the flames of the Brooklyn Theatre.

Part II, Epilogue: Hoax

From Brooklyn to Chicago: An 1875 Forward to the Iroquois Disaster

If tracking the historical record of theaters in America (and, indeed, around the world) in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has illuminated anything, it is that popular culture and contemporary, professional histories emphasized the potential danger of attending the theatre. Shoddy and quick construction; non-existent, inadequate, and/or unenforced fire codes; attention to aesthetics over function: all were cited as reasons for the danger. Despite a litany of theatre fires, illustrated herein by two of the most destructive — Richmond and Brooklyn — theatres refused to transform.

Chicago was obviously a city aware of the potential ravages of fire, given that a large swath of the city was consumed by conflagration in October of 1871. The particular fears associated with theater fires were specifically given form by the *Chicago Times* on February 13, 1875, when the Saturday edition of that paper's bold and brutal headline read: "BURNED ALIVE." Readers were treated to a gruesome and truly horrifying story about a theatre in Chicago going up in flames during a performance, an eerie parallel to the Brooklyn fire that was, at that time, just under two years away. It would take a sharp-eyed reader to identify the legends in the article that noted the story was simply a "Description of a Suppositious Holocaust Likely to Occur Any Night."

Chicagoans were not amused by the *Times* hoax, and the *Tribune* became a sounding board for anger about, and mockery of, the story. James McVicker, the owner and operator of the Syndicate rival McVicker's Theatre — the one the *Times* intimated had burned to the ground, killing hundreds — suggested, in an editorial, that the article was an example of "Can-Can journalism," purposefully abusing the First Amendment for the sake of sales and circulation.

“The press must have its way,” McVicker lamented, “and there is no corresponding vehicle, with equal spread, through which to cope with it.”¹⁸⁷

The *Times* hoax was incredibly convincing, and stories abound that, because the *Times* created a false, but convincing list of the dead, people in Chicago and around the country panicked upon seeing their family members’ names in the paper, with one such story ending in physical violence for a *Times* reporter when a man, seeing his last name in the paper, presumed his wife had died, and returned at once from St. Louis to Chicago. Upon finding his wife alive at home with their children, the man ventured to the *Times* office with a whip, and “attacked the journalist with the ferocity of a tiger.”¹⁸⁸ Yet the article almost predicts what would happen at the Iroquois, and helps put into context precisely how salient the danger posed by theatre fires was in the closing days of the nineteenth century.

When the Brooklyn Theatre burned just under two years later, the newspapers followed a trend that had existed since at least Richmond’s blaze in 1811; they went out and asked theatre owners and operators to vouch for the safety of their buildings. L.D. Cleveland, the Chicago City Building Commissioner at the time lamented to the *Tribune* that he “[did] not consider any of [the theaters] to be absolutely safe,” and that he was powerless to enforce codes upon the buildings and their owners. “It has been pretty hard times with the owners of halls and theaters,” he explained, “and they don’t want to go to the expense of making any changes.”¹⁸⁹ Although the Brooklyn Theatre fire’s themes of traumatic transformation would succeed in contributing productively to transformations at the personal and social levels, it failed to inspire a transformation in managerial and legal fervor with regards to the enforcement of fire safety codes. Perhaps the true tragedy embedded within the Brooklyn Theatre fire disaster is that, for all of the rhetoric of traumatic transformation that influenced the cultural memory work in the post-

disaster paradigm, the memory of the disaster faded as new paradigms of sociocultural interactions became normalized through repetition.

Theaters in Chicago simply were not safe in 1876. And, despite almost thirty years of relatively safe operation, they were no safer by 1903, and the administration of the city was well aware of it. In April of that year, before construction on the Iroquois had even began, George Williams, the City Building Commissioner, flat-faced and severe, undertook an investigation “with the object of learning how permits have been issued to allow of extreme violations of the building ordinances in the district just without the Union loop.”¹⁹⁰ The primary focus of this investigation concerned the lack of fire exits built onto buildings of three stories or higher, all of which had been built under permit from the city. “I shall see to it that this thing of issuing permits right and left is stopped,” Williams told the Tribune.¹⁹¹ What his investigation uncovered, however, was monumental governmental incompetence: Williams “found that several inspectors had no definite idea as to the territory they are supposed to cover and that some had paid practically no attention to the fire escape order.”¹⁹²

By October of 1903, Williams was prepared to issue 1,500 notices to owners and managers of such buildings, mostly residences.¹⁹³ At the same time, Williams’ office was undergoing a review of all of the theater buildings in the city, and was in the process of preparing a report for the Mayor’s office. Between the start of his investigation in April, and the delivery of the report at the end of October, his office had reviewed, accepted, and issued a permit for the construction of the Iroquois Theatre, under the management of the Theatrical Syndicate, formed in 1896, which had risen rapidly, and which would open in just a few short weeks.

Memory is short. When the Iroquois burned down at the end of 1903, reporters ventured to New York theatre managers asking about the safety of their own buildings. By this time, the

transformative power of the Brooklyn Theatre fire faded, and, despite the obvious structural deficiencies at the “absolutely fireproof” Iroquois Theatre, New York theatrical managers were quick to reassure their patrons. “‘It could not have happened in New York,’ said several managers.”¹⁹⁴

It already had

Part III, Introduction:

No Perfectly Safe Building: Chicago 1903

If the Iroquois Theatre Fire in Chicago on December 30th, 1903 demonstrates anything, it is that memory is short. The remarkable similarities between Chicago and the two major fires that preceded it, Richmond and Brooklyn, suggest that any attempt to ensure the safety of the audience would have resulted in considerably fewer deaths than the six hundred that are attributed to the Iroquois. The fire at Richmond was inevitable, and emblematic of the fate of cheaply, poorly constructed theaters in nineteenth-century America: if this disaster had not occurred in Richmond, it would have happened in another city. The Brooklyn fire was probably avoidable with a more refined understanding of, and respect for, the technologies of spectacle in use in the space, as well as a more careful consideration of the architectural and engineering choices made in the design and construction of the building, but can also be understood as, in a sense, inevitable, given the fire's temporal location in the Conflagration Era, and the reflexive modernism that marked the rapid expansion of dense urban environments during the Industrial Revolution.

Jonas Barish argues that,

Nineteenth-century attacks on the theater... reflect an abiding tension in our natures as social beings. On the one hand we wish to license the fullest mimetic exploration of our own condition — for self-understanding, delight, and self-mastery. But to do so through the medium of other human beings like ourselves means licensing the liberation of much that we wish ultimately to control...so long as we seek to render the quality of our existence in voice, gesture, and color, the simple integrity to which we all at heart aspire will continue to haunt us. To this integrity the antitheatrical prejudice will continue to pay its wry tribute, preserving our awareness of the corruption we risk in the very act of attempting to express and subdue it.¹

That is, religious anti-theatrical prejudice stems, in some major portion, from the theatre's ability to reflect back at the audience the ugly truth of their own "insatiable narcissism" and

“quenchless exhibitionism” through the medium of the human body.² Understood through this insight, the analysis of post-disaster paradigmatic personal, social, and governmental responses to this trilogy of American theatre fires illustrates how each fire’s socio-theatrical self-referentiality informs our understanding of the memory-work produced in the contested terrain of the post-disaster paradigm, how that contested terrain contributes to powerful rhetorical and narrativational attempts to gain purchase upon the disaster event, and how disaster and memory make us face the “abiding tension in our natures of social beings.”³

In Richmond, the sinful construction of theatre embedded within the young country mirrored the tropes used by religious actors to respond to the disaster: the practice of theatre was condemned for its sinful and evil nature, and though some of the victims of the fire may have been more or less virtuous in life, the context of the theatrical space of the disaster redefined their bodies in death, effectively destroying their pasts, their identities. The fiery rhetoric espoused behind the pulpit suggests the level of fear and uncertainty generated by the destructive fire, especially when considered as participating in a year of bizarre phenomena. However, in the act of preaching against the theatre, the clergy used theatrical tools, “preserving [the] awareness of the corruption [they] risk in the very act of attempting to express and subdue it,”⁴ The memory-work of the Richmond Theatre, then, was always already taking place in a community seeking understanding and social re-organization through its religious convictions and beliefs.

In Brooklyn, the rhetorical focus was placed on constructing oneself as a living monument to the dead, asking society to perform an act of surrogation by attempting to fill in the voids created by loss through death.⁵ The theatrical context redefined the area surrounding the theatre much more effectively than it did the practice of theatre itself, and the focus given to production stemming from loss, and the continued, but more visible trend of using theatrical vocabulary to

discuss memorial strategies suggests an awareness of the allure and power of performance.

Where Richmond's religious responses worked to villainize the theatre, the Brooklyn responses to the disaster played upon the themes of transformation embedded within the reflexive modernization of urban existence in the Industrial Revolution by encouraging survivors to live their lives as monuments to the dead.

The Iroquois should have been an opportunity to learn from the mistakes of the past, to give meaning to the deaths in Richmond and Brooklyn, to change the reflection in the mirror. The owners and operators of the theatre, members of the Theatrical Syndicate, understood this, and the techniques they used to market the theatre tied the Iroquois directly to Richmond, Brooklyn, and other theatres destroyed via conflagration: the Iroquois Theatre was advertised in playbills, newspaper postings, and word of mouth across the city as "absolutely fireproof." William J. Davis, the manager of the Iroquois, and the man who would be made to deal with navigating most of the legal burden relevant to the Iroquois disaster, maintained a particular interest in assuring the building was, indeed, "absolutely fireproof." Wilma Dryden notes that Davis's "fear of fire was warranted, born of haunting experience. The Columbia Theatre, which he and Harry Powers managed many years for Klaw and Erlanger, had gone up in flames in fifteen minutes three years before at 1:00 pm on March, 30, 1900."⁶ It took only six weeks for the Iroquois to burn in spectacular fashion.

Relevant to this case study, the narrative tropes used to construct meaning in the post-disaster paradigm of the Iroquois fire were powerfully influenced by the public outrage against the civic and managerial institutions that were, ostensibly, created to keep citizens safe. Of the trilogy of American theatre fires that constitute this dissertation, the Iroquois fire is the one with the richest evidence of post-disaster paradigm contestation, and it is this contestation that forms

the primary framing device for evaluating cultural memory work. To read historical evidence for contention is to illustrate how certain institutional forces work to disenfranchise, or otherwise displace and replace, victim narratives. This section tells the story of the Iroquois, and of remembering and forgetting the Iroquois, by focusing upon the sort of ironic contestation embedded in its marked status as “absolutely fireproof” and the disastrous reality of its conflagratory condition.

The Iroquois, I argue, was marked as ironic and contested from the day its cornerstone was laid and, just as the embedded religious and transformational contexts marked the memory-work produced in the post-disaster paradigms of Richmond and Brooklyn, the themes of contestation and dispute informed how elite-level governmental processing of grass-roots communities struggled to gain purchase on defining the disaster. Ultimately, the contestation and dispute that marked memory-work in the post-disaster paradigm was productive to how elite-level processing of the disaster successfully manipulated the city of Chicago to forget the Iroquois. This is centrally owed to the fact that the governmental and corporate institutions fundamentally failed to ensure safety for the patrons of the Iroquois through their incompetence and lawlessness. In the act of remembering the disaster, then, such failures would be memorialized and reinscribed; it was in the best interest of the government and of the producers/owners of the Iroquois to manipulate the narrative of the event through a process that Paul Ricoeur calls “the phenomenon of ideology,” which he defines as “the intervention of a disturbing and multiform factor that insinuates itself between the demand for identity and the public expressions of memory,” a process that is simultaneously “hidden” and “extremely complex.”⁷ In working to control the narrative of the Iroquois disaster, institutional forces like the Theatrical Syndicate, or the City of

Chicago, insinuated themselves into the process of recreating identity following a disruptive disaster via public expression of memory.

The ironies embedded within the evidence about the Iroquois disaster illustrate the productive nature of contestation and dispute as frameworks for understanding memory-work produced in the post-disaster paradigm. Such ironies and disputes were centrally used in reporting on the Iroquois disaster via a theatrical vocabulary. A *New York Times* blurb about the disaster read,

The elements of tragedy — pity and fear — are blended in the account of the destruction of the Iroquois Theatre in Chicago, and of the lives of so great a part of its holiday audience...the emotion the news excited is compounded of those two elements. Pity for the victims, fear lest the reader or hearer of the tale may himself be involved in a like disaster, as helpless and as doomed as the victims of Chicago...it is almost the proverbial destiny of a theatre to die by fire. When one burns up empty and harmless a sigh of relief from those who read of it testifies the instinctive apprehension which a building of this class excites.⁸

Even the Chicago city Coroner John Traeger was self-conscious in his adoption of a theatrical vocabulary. “There was something rotten in Denmark,” Traeger told the *Tribune*, “and we want to make somebody responsible. We will not tolerate this throwing of the black back and forth like a shuttlecock.”⁹

Jonas Barish wrote, “as [the nineteenth] century advances we begin to encounter not only a tolerance for the theater, and an enthusiasm for the theater, but a cult of the theater — if not for the theater as an institution, at least for theatricality as a mode of existence.”¹⁰ That Traeger and the *New York Times* demonstrate an awareness of the theatrical as a mode of existence — that is, the inherent theatricality of the disaster event — points out that there was an immediate and powerful understanding, even if subconscious, that the struggle in the wake of the Iroquois disaster would be a struggle to control the narrative of the event.

By positioning the disaster as inherently theatrical, and theatre as inherently dangerous, as existing on a fatalistic line towards destruction — by invoking the Aristotelian definition of tragedy — the *Times* suggests that the Iroquois disaster can be read as marked by its own theatricality. In unpacking the development and use of tools of theatre as forms of response to disaster events, I argue that, just as theatres in the Conflagration Era were marked by the reflexive modernization that transformed urban life in the Industrial Revolution, theatre-based disaster processes and the resultant memory-work are marked by a reflective theatricalization, whereby the re-organization of social systems of order can be understood for their tendency to reveal the negotiation of disrupted identity through performance analysis. Traeger's words, meanwhile, suggest an awareness (or at least the suspicion) of an institutional conspiracy. In both cases, the suggestion of reading the fire through the lens of a theatrical structure — tragedy, as understood by Aristotle and Shakespeare — suggests there are ironies and flaws that must be unpacked in order to achieve a deeper appreciation of the text of the disaster, and of the resultant struggle to define the disaster.

This trend would be picked up and furthered by Wilma Dryden, who wrote,

The irony is that of Aristotle's *peripeteia*. A dramatic reversal turns the expected good fortune to grief beyond measure. Because of his experience of fire at the Columbia, [Davis] is determined to fireproof the Iroquois. Yet in the "safest theatre in the world" six hundred people are burned to death.¹¹

The fundamental truth of the Iroquois Theatre fire — of all theatre fires — is summed up in a brutal sentence by disaster researcher Scott G. Knowles: "there is no perfectly safe building, only buildings evolving towards safety."¹² Chicago serves as an illustration of the monumental struggle for the sociopolitical right to remember, and how the elite-level narratives, empowered by the legal assuagement of guilt, overwhelmed and subsumed counter-narratives and counter-

memories of survivor communities and victims alike, propelling the Iroquois's "rapid slippage...into a historical past..."¹³

This is a story of what happens when everything goes wrong.

Part III, Chapter 8: Absolutely Fireproof

A Fireproof Structure

From the earliest whisperings of the Iroquois, the theatre was the site of contesting interests. These oppositions were expressed nowhere so readily as in the long process of preparing the site for construction and the theatre for opening to the public in November of 1903. Before that time, the building had already suffered its share of bad luck since Benjamin J. Marshall, the architect, submitted his plans to the city on July 4th, 1902.¹⁴ It had taken almost a year to begin construction, and the New York investors — the thin-faced, mustachioed Marc Klaw, and his squat, round, bald-headed partner A. L. “Abe” Erlanger of the powerful and influential Theatrical Syndicate — had been pressuring Chicago Iroquois managers William J. Davis and Harry J. Powers to get the building open in time for the beginning of the new theatrical season. This chapter tracks the protracted and difficult history of building the Iroquois Theatre, and the production of *Mr. Blue Beard*, in order to illustrate how the themes of disastrous negligence and bitter dispute that, I argue, defined the cultural production of memory work in the post-disaster paradigm, were strongly prevalent in the pre-disaster history of the theatre.

The Syndicate’s investment into the Iroquois was a major step in expanding their considerable influence across the country. They were making friends with notable Chicago businessmen to invest in the venture, while simultaneously purchasing other buildings in the Loop district of downtown Chicago. Otto Young was one such wealthy local, and was in deep negotiations to purchase the land on which the theatre was built during the summer of 1903 for half a million dollars. Klaw and Erlanger had purchased a lease down the street from the theatre at 85 and 87 Randolph Street, and were in negotiations to purchase the remainder of the property there, with the intention to construct an enormous hotel that would be financially attached to the

theatre. The deal with Young must have fell through, and the space was eventually rented from its owners, Arthur T. Lyman, George R. Harris, and A. Lawrence Lowell.¹⁵ Still, the potential deal spoke to the investment fervor occurring in the Loop, at the center of which would be the Iroquois: this theatrical operation was poised to turn a huge profit, and re-invent Chicago as the premiere theatre tourist destination in the world.

The Iroquois Theater was to be the greatest, most modern marvel of a theatre ever created, a shining beacon in windy Chicago, a challenge to the theaters along Broadway: “anything you can do, we can do better.” New York took notice, and the *New York Times* began reporting on the Theatrical Syndicate’s latest plan: “promoters say [the theater] will be the finest in America. The location is one of the best, being near all street car lines.”¹⁶ A 1902 *Times* article on the Syndicate completing negotiations for the site of the theatre provides, perhaps, the first note of contestation that would come to define the disastrous history of the Iroquois Theatre:

It is provided that the lessees are to erect a fireproof structure covering a part of the property, the building to be used exclusively for the theatre and to remodel some of the other buildings on the premises, all to be completed by May 1, 1904...present plans, however, contemplate having the theatre completed by Sept. 1, 1903.¹⁷

The September 1st deadline was overly ambitious, and even under the best of circumstances, it was nearly impossible for the theatre to open so early. The *Times* blurb illustrates the on-going dispute between the corporate-minded Syndicate’s desire to open the theatre as soon as possible and the reality of constructing the building. The cornerstone for the building wasn’t even placed until the end of July 1903. In attendance at that dedication were Davis himself, Powers, Marshall, and a host of other Chicago note-worthies, including Colonel Jack Haverly, a theatrical manager and Davis’ former boss.

“A leaden casket,” the *New York Times* reported, “was hoisted into place” into which David deposited several items.¹⁸ These items included copies of the city’s major newspapers,

pictures of Will and Jessie Davis, and their son, William, Jr., pictures of Harry Powers, theatrical magazines, and United States coins. Perhaps the most bizarre inclusion was a box of cigarettes alongside a photograph of Lucy Page Gaston, founder and operator of the Anti-Cigarette League of America. Though the effect was probably intended to be of good humor, the placement into a “casket” of both cigarettes and an image of Lucy Page Gaston, items understood to be in diametric opposition, suggests a framework of foundational contestation for reading the Iroquois disaster process: the Iroquois was literally built upon irony and dispute, and Davis had cemented himself to that legacy.

It Takes a Disaster To Make One Cautious

When it was produced for the first time at Theatre Royal, Drury Lane in 1901, *Mr. Blue Beard*, a Christmas pantomime, appealed to families and children. Consequently, as part of the marketing of the production, an illustrated children’s book, retelling the tale, was published. An interesting point emerges in the preface of the children’s book, written by the authors of the Drury Lane script, Arthur Collins and Jay Hickory Wood: “Blue Beard has no nationality, such as would satisfy an income-tax collector or a parish receiving officer,” they argue. “...As Lascelles Campbell said in ‘The Great Millionaire’: ‘I belong to the new nation — the nation that’s born as old nations mingle and die...I’ve lived in the world, and I know what rules the world - Money. That’s my nation.’”¹⁹ The authors’ identification of Blue Beard as belonging to the Moneyed nationality provides a way to think about the construction problems Davis, Powers, and their Syndicate partners ran into during their attempts and delays to open the theatre.

This section tracks the production of *Mr. Blue Beard* that would open the theatre. If the long and difficult process of constructing the Iroquois helped to define the intense and bitter contestation between elite-level and grass-roots memory production in the post-disaster

paradigm, the production of *Mr. Blue Beard* helped to advance those same themes through the considerable use of technologies of spectacle at the expense of the use technologies of safety and hazard mitigation. The production and the theatre existed within a neat symbiosis of disastrous negligence, the former mutually reinforcing the strength of the latter. Reading reviews of the show evidences that the show relied heavily upon spectacle to astound, amaze, and distract from the poor writing of the script, the production focusing instead on the sheer size and spectacle of the theatrical event. Given the emphasis on spectacle, runs of the show also often featured accidents and dangers to the performers, stories that converged upon the production. This point becomes of particular importance through its distinct relationship to the Iroquois; if the building was, as advertised, “absolutely fireproof,” the regular dangers inherent in the production of *Blue Beard* would not have caused so much widespread death and destruction; conversely, if *Blue Beard* were not so centrally spectacular, the theatre’s extant, if poor, hazard mitigation and safety technologies may have been enough to keep the people safe. The confusion over assigning blame for the disastrous consequences of the symbiotic negligence, I will argue later, stemmed from this “chicken and egg” style argument. Theatre fires were a nebulous concern in the public’s minds, easily silenced when they went to be entertained, despite the destruction at Brooklyn only twenty-seven years earlier.

Backstage was a very different story, however. In a spectacle like *Mr. Blue Beard*, when aerialists were ballet dancing through the air, when the electrical lines couldn’t properly meet the needs of the lighting demands, every performance was a tightrope walk between life and death. The evidence included here also represents much of what remains in terms of descriptions of the production. A music book with a handful of songs from the production represents one of the only records of the action onstage during *Mr. Blue Beard*; no extant copy of the 1903 J. J. McNally

script exists, only a copy of the 1901 Drury Lane script. Reviews about the production, then, provide some of the only information about what transpired onstage during a normal production of *Blue Beard*.

The wearing construction of the Iroquois was a fiscal brutality to Davis and Power, Klaw and Erlanger, and Philadelphia owner/investors/Syndicate partners John Frederick Zimmerman and Samuel F. Nixon. The theatre was built at enormous cost during a summer and early autumn of labor unrest in the city of Chicago, further cementing the building's legacy to themes of dispute and contestation that underlay its construction. The longer it took to open the building and start selling tickets, the more money the Syndicate lost. The newly re-christened *Mr. Blue Beard*, Americanized by lawyer-turned playwright John J. McNally, and featuring a slew of new songs by J. Cheever Goodwin and Frederic Solomon, was not a cheap show.²⁰ When Klaw & Erlanger imported the show to America from Drury Lane in January 1903, the *New York Times* wrote that the show was “monstrously splendid and dazzling,” and suggested that the star of the show “was the constantly shifting scenery, the thousands of gorgeous costumes, the floods of kaleidoscopic lights, and, most of all, the hundreds of young girls and young women that lent flesh and substance ...to the fine frenzies of the costumer and the limelight man.”²¹

Following its New York premiere run at the Knickerbocker Theatre — it closed in May — Klaw and Erlanger announced they were putting *Mr. Blue Beard* on the road, and that they were keeping the star and principal attraction of the production: the rubber-faced, gravel-voiced Edwin Fitzgerald, Jr., known more popularly as Eddie Foy, playing the raucously comedic part of the Ping-Pong playing, clog-dancing Sister Anne, attired in ludicrous drag. Rehearsals for the production re-started in mid-August, and the show opened in Pittsburgh in late September at the Alvin Theatre, where the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* echoed the sentiments of the earlier Times review:

Stupendous is the word that best describes the production. Massive and gorgeous scenery, and immense crowd of pretty girls, magnificent costumes, colored lights, plenty of fun were the elements that made up the entertainment.²²

From Pittsburgh, the show made stops in Boston, Indianapolis, Cleveland, and St. Louis en route to its stay at the Iroquois. Staging *Mr. Blue Beard*'s house of horrors was something of a horror in and of itself, a \$200,000 musical spectacular, requiring "100,000 square feet of sheeting, 26,000 square feet of gauze, 8,000 board feet of braces and battens, and 11 miles of hemp rope," all of which helped comprise the placement and use of almost 300 set pieces that hung in the fly loft.²³ The show required over a thousand costumes, hundreds of chorus girls and other supernumeraries, and employed the famous Grigolatis Troupe of Aerialists — Klaw & Erlanger favorites — most notably the Premiere and Grand Corps de Ballet Nellie Reed, for some particularly impressive moments. Perhaps the most spectacular moment came near the end of the second act, when Reed "sailed smilingly over the heads of the audience to the top gallery rail scattering roses in her ascent."²⁴

That the show did not always run smoothly can hardly be a surprise given the enormity and complexity of the technical elements, and reports about the dangers posed by the play began to appear quickly. The most particular account comes from the *New York Clipper*, and appears just weeks after the show's opening at the Knickerbocker, in a theatrical gossip column:

After several encores of the "Hamlet" song, Foy's next bit of business is a very much disjointed soliloquy, after which he lies down upon a trap door nearly the length of his body, repeating:

"I die, Mother, I die — I die!" ("Three dies is your cue," he said to the musical director the other night.)

At this instant the trap disappears with Foy, and lurid flames burst forth from the opening. A moment later he reappears from the fiery grave with a fireman's hat upon his head, and a scroll in his hand which he unfolds so that the audience may read:

"No room down there."

Evidently this exciting bit of business is attended with some little danger of accident, for the other night, after his fiery bath, Foy came up from the trap afire. His wreath and ruff had ignited, while his boys' sized kilt skirt showed signs of a bad scorching. This he did not notice himself until an assistant stage manager rushed upon the stage and enveloped him in a coat which smothered the flames.

Never for an instant losing his presence of mind, Foy looked out at his audience and exclaimed:

"You never can kill a bad actor," after which he made a hasty exit, followed by the cheers of the audience.²⁵

The same column describe another harrowing experience had by Foy:

One night last week another hitch attended his trap door scene. When he emerged and the trap was quickly shut her found that the aforementioned kilt skirt was securely fastened, holding him an unwilling prisoner in a sitting positioning the center of the stage.

Mr. Foy, not at all disconcerted, gave his next line in that position, after which he succeeded in wrenching this garment free and proceeded with the business of the scene as though this contretemps had been a rehearsed part of it.²⁶

But perhaps, in hindsight, the most damning brush with danger came during the company's stop at the Cleveland Opera House in Cleveland, Ohio in early November. Foy recalls the electrical demands of the show's many spectacular tableaux required too great a strain on the theatre's grid, writing,

It was well known to the electricians of the company that in order to obtain the desired lighting effects, they were carrying much too heavy a load of power on the wires...one of the big lights...blew out its fuse. That was what had caused the Cleveland blaze...²⁷

Reports of the fire suggest something eerily close to what would eventually occur at the Iroquois. "A flame spurted...and touched fire to a flimsy piece of drapery at the side of the stage," reports Nat Brandt.²⁸ An electrician employed by the Syndicate would later add to this narrative. "I inspected the electrical apparatus when the company reached [Cleveland]," he reported. "Fully one-third of it was deficient and I condemned it and ordered that none of it be used in Cleveland."²⁹

Dunn, another theatrical electrician, reports that there were two fires that occurred in Cleveland, adding to Foy's account an experience when, while powering on the lights for a

matinee performance, wires were crossed and “every lamp in the piece was smashed to bits and the scenery about it was set afire.”³⁰ That the fires amounted to nothing, and went unreported at the time, is unsurprising, given the frequency of small flare-ups noted elsewhere in this dissertation; besides, in the wake of theatre fires there always appear narratives of the numerous fires that have occurred silently and without notice by the audience, which are managed and snuffed by the cast and crew members backstage. “I had been playing in theaters for so long without any trouble with fire that the incident didn’t give me much of a scare,” Foy wrote later. “It takes a disaster to make one cautious.”³¹

All the Work Had Not Been Completed

As *Blue Beard* travelled, it enjoyed extended stays in many cities. Good ticket sales were obviously one reason, but another was probably that the Iroquois simply wasn’t ready to open to the public yet. Chicago was anxious to have its brand new, state of the art, top of the line theatre open for consumption; New York was beginning to get sassy. “...Will J. Davis’ Summer of hustling,” the *New York Clipper* reported, “has almost gone for naught.”³² Another article explicated, tiredly and pointedly, about the opening of *Mr. Blue Beard* at the Iroquois, “this is the latest of a series of announcements which have, of necessity, been cancelled because of delays in completing the interior furnishings” of the theatre.³³ This section describes the layout of the theatre, and the incomplete state of the theatre when it opened in November 1903, in order to advance the argument that themes of irony, dispute, and contestation were always already embedded within a sociological understanding of the Iroquois. As noted in the conclusion to the preceding case study, Building Commissioner George Williams had submitted “a bulky report on the theaters” to Mayor Carter Harrison, Jr. at the end of October.³⁴ The content of Williams’ report was sensational: every theatre in the city, it claimed, was in gross violation of civic fire

codes, and Chicago would issue no more permits to run theaters until every house had undergone costly alterations. “Either the ordinances must be revised or the theaters must be altered,” Williams told the *Tribune*.³⁵ The report was sent to the judiciary committee,³⁶ and the issue was effectively tabled. The gross violations of the fire code at theaters across the city continued unabated.

Finally, after months of delays, wrangling with the unions, and navigating the murky pathways of City Hall, the Iroquois was ready to open. The date was set: November 23rd, 1903, a Monday. Demand for tickets was understandably high. Eddie Foy was in high spirits about the announcement. He was returning home, to the city that he loved, and that loved him in return. Days before the company arrived in Chicago, Foy sent a letter to a Chicago real estate office comically announcing his impending presence. “Lease me the swellest house on the Lake Shore drive ruing the run of ‘Mr. Bluebeard’ at the Iroquois,” he wrote. “My artistic temperament won’t stand for Chicago hotels. House must have a commodious bar attached, as I am fond of the ponies...being forced to live even for an hour in the Annex might be seriously detrimental to my artistic temperament.”³⁷

Like the Brooklyn Theatre, the Iroquois was built in an L-Shape, turning the corner from Randolph to Dearborn Street, “wrapping itself around what was once known as the Real Estate Exchange building on the corner.”³⁸ As in Brooklyn, this spatial configuration was obviously an attempt to make the most of the urban landscape, but the fact that the “absolutely fireproof” theatre was haunted by the design philosophy of a theatre that had already catastrophically burned down suggests another example of MacKay’s “grotesque sameness” between theatrical conflagrations. The facade of the theatre on Randolph was a truly impressive sight, “the most imposing and attractive facade to be seen in this city of modern structures...”³⁹ Built in the

French renaissance style with a strong suggestion of classic Greek architecture, the facade stood eighty feet high and sixty feet wide, composed of Bedford stone. But all attention was drawn upwards towards the arch and the pediment. Fifty-two feet high, enormous stone and marble columns on either side that disappeared into pilasters supported the arch above the doorway adorned with advertisements for the current amusement showing at the theatre. The pediment had images of Comedy, given the form of a jester, and Tragedy, given the “semi-recumbent figure of a woman heroic in size.”⁴⁰

The real attraction was the Iroquois Indian bust that stood silent sentinel beneath the pediment, and over the doors of the building, donated by Davis from “his large library of Americana.”⁴¹ The name and image of the Iroquois came from Davis’ long-standing interest in the Native American tribe, as described by Edward Freiberger in his essay *From Sauganash to Iroquois*, found in the Iroquois commemorative program. “Mr. Davis’ devotion to the history of the Indian has been constant,” Freiberger explained, “and he was deeply impressed by the fact that in the early days they were led by the Iroquois...so this theatre, designed to be a leader, was named the Iroquois.”⁴² The facade was meant to frame the American qualities of exceptionalism — this was the finest theatre ever built; individualism — the theatre rose over the stubborn demands of various unions; and expansionism — the theatre was designed as one of the largest, most opulent houses in the world. Jane Barnette offers a fourth possible framing device: “the threshold to the Iroquois,” she writes, “provided a luxurious framework for patrons to display their fashionable frocks, reassuring visitors that they were in a respectable part of the city where safety could be expected.”⁴³ Barnette’s suggestion that the theatre was built to frame the private body inculcated in its own public performance of self is reinforced by Nixon’s essay. “To see and be seen,” he wrote, “is the duality of advantage presented for the patrons of the Iroquois.”⁴⁴

To these four framing devices provided by the Iroquois' facade — exceptionalism, individualism, expansionism, and self-as-performance — I will add the insight given to Anthony Hatch, author of *Tinder Box*, by a young reporter who was on the scene when the fire occurred. Charles Collins was reporting for the *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, and mentioned to Hatch that a rumor about the building had been whispered amongst architects, engineers, and builders: the facade “looked, except for minor details, almost exactly like a monument erected in Paris to commemorate the deaths of one hundred and fifty people who lost their lives in a horrible flash fire in the city’s 1897 Charity Bazaar.”⁴⁵ Thus, the Iroquois framed its patrons' experiences in meta-theatrical and oppositional ways, suggesting simultaneously the greatness of American architectural and engineering ingenuity, and the mortal dangers inherent in arrogance, greed, and theatrical spaces.

The theatre was gorgeous. Walking through one of the “five pairs of wide mahogany doors with glass panels,” a patron would find themselves in an elliptical room 20x40 foot, with an eighteen foot high ceiling beamed with marble.⁴⁶ At the west end of this room, a patron could purchase tickets; decorated iron stairs at the east end led up to the administrative offices for Davis, Powers, and others. Walking through a set of swinging doors led to the grand foyer, sixty feet wide and eighty feet long, adorned by pillars holding up a sixty foot ceiling, and designed with sight in mind: the Iroquois was a social event as much as a house of theatre. High above, skylights seemed to glitter, “delicately tinted in cloud forms, studded with jewels,” the skylight gave the impression of stars glittering in the night sky.⁴⁷ Grand staircases, dotted with landings and benches, led to seating on the second and third floors.

Inside the auditorium, ninety feet wide by seventy-one feet deep, Marshall had kept line of sight in mind, and there were no bad seats in the house. The theatre sat 1,724 people; 744 seats in

the parquet, 24 box seats, 465 seats in the dress circle with two boxes holding sixteen people, and 475 seats in the balcony, with “plenty of good standing room on each floor.”⁴⁸ Painted in a deep American Beauty red, with slight tints of gold, silver and green throughout, the auditorium gave way to a “well-blended sky effect done in soft greens, cerulean blues, and mauves, with clouds in grays and pearl tints” on the ceiling, which was ringed also by “a frieze illustrating the history of the Chicago stage, from the relatively primitive Rice Theatre to the ultra-modern Iroquois.”⁴⁹ The theatre was roofed by an artificial sky, and patrons were kept constantly under the gaze of the past. The enormous stage of the Iroquois was 110 feet wide and fifty-three feet deep, and could be covered by two equally enormous curtains, the act drop, “a study rich and mellow in autumnal tints” and the asbestos curtain, showing “a summer scene on the Mohawk River,” painted by the French artist St. John Lewis.⁵⁰ Trainer & Co., a Massachusetts company, provided the asbestos curtain.⁵¹ Backstage were dressing rooms attended to by an elevator on one side of the stage, and underneath an area for supernumeraries, and high above it all was the rigging loft, seventy-six feet above the stage floor, where the hundreds of backdrops for *Mr. Bluebeard* would be stored, and from which the Grigolatis aerial dancers would be manipulated by the fly crew.

The grand opening of the Iroquois on November 23rd was an unmitigated success, a lavish affair befitting the opulence of the building. “A playhouse so splendid in its every appointment, so beautiful in its every part, so magnificent and yet so comfortable, Chicago has heretofore not been able to call its own,” the *Chicago Tribune* reported.⁵² Making up the members of the gushing audience were some of the biggest names in the city: Mr. And Mrs. William Vernon Booth, owners of the five-and-a-half million dollar fish firm A. Booth Company were present; railroad executive Samuel Morse Felton, Jr. attended with his wife Dora, and their daughter; Dr. H. H. Brown, he of shoe company fame, attended with his wife. John G. Shedd, President of the

local Marshall Field & Company, sat in a box among family and friends, and, of course, Will Davis, Harry Powers, Samuel Nixon — operators of the Iroquois and members and employees of the Syndicate — and Benjamin Marshall, the theatre's architect.⁵³ Conspicuous by their absence were Marc Klaw and Abe Erlanger; perhaps they were in New York, busy with their production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or dealing with the mounting “war” with David Belasco.⁵⁴

Following the second act, which ended with Nellie Reed flying out over the audience to the balconies, scattering carnations over the crowd, calls went up for Davis and Powers from audience members. Davis responded, bringing Benjamin Marshall in front of the curtain to receive the audience's approbations. Marshall “announced that the Iroquois was the creation of western talent, abilities and enthusiasm, and that western appreciation and encouragement were all that were desired.”⁵⁵ When the cries didn't abate, Powers stood from his seat in the gallery and gave the credit to the people of Chicago; when Samuel Nixon joined his partners onstage, Davis assured the audience the Philadelphian was proof of his statements about western ingenuity; Powers was, it had to be said, a Hoosier.⁵⁶ But the people really wanted to see their guy, the one they called by his first name: Eddie. As cries went up for him, the orchestra struck up a tune, and the show continued. The Iroquois was a marvel. The opening was a hit. Things were terrific. And the words were splashed across every advertisement in the city: the Iroquois was “absolutely fireproof.” But Davis had lied to Klaw and Erlanger, and the opening night gala marked the Iroquois as a space of dispute between disastrous reality and the representation of safety. The theatre was not ready to open. Harry Powers would later confirm the building was accepted from the Fuller Company in a state of incompleteness: “...all the work had not been completed,” he testified. “Now, what constitutes acceptance of the building from the building company, I don't know from a legal standpoint. I know we had not received final statements

from them, and that we had not paid them in full.”⁵⁷ Gary Webb notes that the opening of the Iroquois may illustrate a trend in disaster mitigation in complex urban sociopolitical systems.

Webb writes,

Several recent studies argue that cultures that exist in bureaucratic organizations produce mistakes and disasters. These organizations often value profit over safety, misperceive risk, and produce “fantasy documents” that give the public the sometimes misleading impression that things are under control.⁵⁸

The events that led up to the opening of the Iroquois, and to the fire six weeks later, were marked by the same tensions that would define the production of memory-work in the post-disaster paradigm. Disputes between labor unions and the Theatrical Syndicate, the pressures placed upon Davis to open the theatre by Klaw and Erlanger, the evident dangers in the production of *Mr. Blue Beard*, and the tension between the gorgeous design and construction of the theatre and the poor (or absent) fire and hazard safety technologies point to a linkage between the narrative and rhetorical tropes used in the writing of the Iroquois’ history, and the embeddedness of the tropes of irony, dispute, and opposition within the disaster site and event itself. The production of memory in the post-disaster paradigm results in some degree from the history that precedes it, the disaster event not being “external in some magical way to the realities of the human-shaped environment or political culture in which [it] occur[ed].”⁵⁹

In the case of the Iroquois, given the numerous and pervasive problems that marked the design and construction of both the building and the production of *Mr. Blue Beard* as being imbricated within a context of dispute and opposition, and given that these disputes led to the theatre being opened without all of the work having been completed, contributing in proximate ways to the carnage at the Iroquois, the memory-work produced by elite-level and grass-roots communities would necessarily use these themes to negotiate the disrupted spatiotemporal context of life in Chicago post-Iroquois Theatre fire.

Part III, Chapter 9: A Playhouse So Splendid

Standing Room Only

This chapter tracks the events inside of the Iroquois Theatre on the afternoon of December 30th, 1903, in order to develop a narrative of the disaster event. Reading the various and numerous survivor narratives that entered the historical record through their contribution to the official inquiry into the event primarily developed this narrative. While many of these narratives reinforce each other, many of them also contradict and refute each other, and this tendency, I argue, contributes to the narrative tropes of dispute, opposition and contestation in the post-disaster paradigm. As an example of this kind of dispute of fact, there is some tension in the relative financial success of the show at the Iroquois: although the *Tribune* noted in its December 13th edition that “there is little evidence of any marked abatement of public interest” in *Mr. Blue Beard*, Klaw and Erlanger had made the call to move Eddie Foy and company out of the Iroquois in order to install another spectacular in the space: *Ben-Hur*, set to open January 11th, 1904.⁶⁰ Noting, illustrating, and examining the tensions between such disputes implies the development and use of a theatricalized fiction within the context of reality, reinforcing the link between post-disaster paradigmatic memory-work, and theatre’s “inherent constructedness.”⁶¹

On Wednesday, December 30th, a large audience braved the brutal cold and slushed through the snowy remnants of the last week towards the large, marble facade of the “playhouse so splendid.”⁶² So large was the audience that the house — confirmed to fit 1,724 people safely — was undoubtedly over packed, and filled with “standing room only” ticket holders. One patron, Josephine Perry, had struggled to the top floor of the theatre after arriving late, and was surprised to find that “people were standing four deep behind my seat.”⁶³ Robert D. Laughlin reported “women and children were sitting on the steps of the aisles and that in entering the

theater he was hindered by the people in the aisles.”⁶⁴ Most reports place attendance that afternoon between 2,000 and 2,100 people. Stage right, sitting on a platform several feet above the stage, William McMullen had noticed a spot light on the bridge wasn’t operating correctly, and had left his normal light to tend to it.⁶⁵ McMullen was new to operating theatre lights, but had made notice of several problems with the lighting in the theatre, specifically concerning the large flood light in relation to the frilly borders that hung backstage: “the draft used to carry it down towards the proscenium wall at times,” he would later report.⁶⁶ “The drapery of the proscenium arch hung so close to my lamp that it often brushed against the hood of the clamp.”⁶⁷

There is some dispute as to the specific light that began the fire in the Iroquois. Many sources agree the lamp was a calcium light, though many others say it was a carbon arc flood light. In either case, the light was designed to wash a large area of the stage. The lamp functioned by running a spark or an electric arc through the carbon/calcium rods in the bulb, producing enough heat to vaporize the element, creating a profound brightness, directed by the bell-shaped reflector in which the bulb was installed. As a byproduct of this luminance, the vaporized carbon/calcium simultaneously produced an incredible amount of heat: upwards of 6500 degrees Fahrenheit. The heat was vented through the top of the device via several small slits in the reflector panel. McMullen had learned the hard way to avoid the heat vent, as his calloused and burned hands testified. Though he had seen the arch drapery shift in the breezy backstage towards the light, he evidently gave this no concern as he went to work on the burned out spotlight. He had done his due diligence: “I complained to Electrician Dunn on Klaw and Erlanger’s company that it was dangerous,” he’d say later. “But he never fixed it.”⁶⁸ Dunn had mumbled something in return. “Dunn is a rather hard man to understand,” McMullen said. “He said something about seeing to it.”⁶⁹

Just a Little Bit of Flame

Madeline Dupont was born Adeline Josephine Curtis to the shipbuilding Curtis family in Brooklyn, and after a lifelong love affair with theatre, had managed to land a role in the chorus line of Eddie Foy's company at the age of nineteen. She was backstage waiting with the other members of the double octet, preparing to enter for the number *Let Us Swear It By the Pale Moonlight* when she "first saw just a little bit of flame" on "the first drop of the curtain. It was just above the lamp that was reflecting on the moonlight girls."⁷⁰ Gertrude Lawrence, the leader of the women's octet, confirms this timeframe: 'I was...going to meet my partner when I first saw the flame. I went on working as usual, down to the front, and paid no more attention to it because I thought it would soon be out.'⁷¹ But the show went on: as the octet entered, Dupont recalled that the assistant stage manager, William Plunkett had placed the call for the asbestos curtain to come down.⁷² Plunkett had likely made this signal using "a light switch, which, when pulled, turns on a light in the flies. This light is a signal to the curtain man up there to run down the fire curtain."⁷³

McMullen stood on the bridge when he looked up and "saw the curtain fluttering over the other lamp and catch fire."⁷⁴ Precisely what initiated the fire remains a mystery, and numerous reports from cast and crew conflict. McMullen suggests it was either "a spark from the carbons or from the heat," meaning that it was either an electrical issue with the carbon-arc lamp itself, or that a curtain got too close to the incredible heat the lamp generated. Later, McMullen would claim to have seen "a spark" shoot up and catch the bottom of the curtain above it.⁷⁵ In his autobiography, published years later, Foy suggests that "in spite of some slight conflict of opinion, there can be no doubt that one of the big lights high up at one side of the stage blew out its fuse," and, in doing so, shot superheated electric sparks onto the drapery around the lamp. Foy

is quick to note “that was what had caused the Cleveland blaze” and that the electricians of the company knew they were placing a strain on the electrical capacity of the building.⁷⁶ W. H. Ladridge corroborates Foy’s account, as well as McMullen’s account of the electrical spark beginning the blaze. Twenty feet above the problematic lamp, Ladridge had left his duty as a spotlight worker to watch the *Pale Moonlight* double octet number when he “noticed a flash of light where the electric wires connect with the calcium light. The flash seemed to be about six inches long,” and the curtain only caught fire after it has swayed against the already burning lamp.⁷⁷ McMullen identifies it as a carbon-arc lamp, while Ladridge identifies it as a calcium light, another example of the contestations that would come to mark memory-work within the post-disaster paradigm. The various and contesting attributions of the particularities of the lamp demonstrate the struggle to successfully and reliably identify proximate causes for the fire and, so, to efficiently operate the post-disaster process of assigning legal guilt and promote the institutional re-establishing of trust in the political systems that provided for the creation and sustaining of the disaster-prone environment.

“Softly give the signal for the ladies to appear,” the men sang, following with a whistle. “Just a little louder boys, in case they didn’t hear.” And again, they whistled, louder. The male octet members “walked four steps and danced eight, bringing the members to the center of the stage,” reported “Jack” Strause, one of the male octet members. Backstage, William McMullen struggled to put the fire out, and William Sallers, the house fireman, joined him. McMullen began trying to “crush it out with my hands,” while Sallers grabbed a tube of Kilfyre to sprinkle on the flame, and found it to be utterly ineffective as a fire retardant. Sallers shouted for someone to sound an alarm to the fire department, but there was no alarm box in the theatre. An employee

left the theatre, and headed towards the nearest alarm box at Dearborn and Lake Streets, two blocks away.⁷⁸

The members of the double octet, finishing up the first verse of the song, were aware of the fire, but kept going so long as they could, not wanting to cause any disturbance or panic in the audience, an echo of Claxton's decision twenty-three years earlier in Brooklyn, and of Hopkins Robertson in Richmond ninety-two years earlier. "I thought it would soon be out," Gertrude Lawrence explained.⁷⁹ Herbert Dillea, the conductor, saw a flash of red out of the corner of his eye. "The moment I saw the red glare I knew there was a fire, and in whispers I ordered the other members of the orchestra to play as fast as they could, as I thought the asbestos would be lowered."⁸⁰ Edith Williams, another chorus girl, broke the fiction, cried out, and fell to the floor. Strause, her partner, caught her and set her upright, but she collapsed again. Strause swooped down to pick her up and saw that the fire had continued to grow, and that the asbestos curtain had begun to drop.

And then it snagged.

In the same way that the type of lamp provided a source of contention, the status and quality of the asbestos curtain was similarly marked by dispute. When, the day after the fire, the members of Coroner John Traeger's jury made an examination of the theatre, the asbestos curtain served as the focal point of a great deal of debate and contention, and would remain so for years following the fire, simultaneously contributing to, and serving as a metaphor for, the post-disaster paradigmatic tropes of dispute that influenced how the event was remembered. There were three prominent theories relating to the curtain: first, that it was made of poor quality asbestos, and so was burned up in the fire; second, that the curtain was not asbestos, and so was burned up in the fire; third, that Davis and Powers had known that the curtain was not asbestos,

and would not stand up to testing, and so had removed the curtain from the building following the fire. The quality, condition, and presence of the asbestos curtain were a serious point of contention in the courts and in public discussions about the blaze.

The afternoon following the fire, Coroner John Traeger had arranged a jury of men to investigate the remains of the theatre. The *Tribune* reported, “the coroner and the jury could find nothing that had the least semblance to even the remains of the fireproof drop. There were half a dozen rods that might have belonged to the curtain, but no one could find a trace of the sheet itself.”⁸¹

The *Tribune* also noted that,

No vestige of the asbestos curtain remained save for a few pieces that were bound into the clasps that connected it with the supporting wires on both sides of the proscenium arch. Where the rest of the curtain has gone to no one knew yesterday, although it was generally declared that it had crumbled up with the intense heat.⁸²

The company who provided the curtain, Trainer & Co., was the lowest bidder by \$56.00.⁸³

C.W. Trainer, head of the company, said,

The one we made for the Iroquois theater did not contain the wire insertion, but it was of a good grade of cloth, and would compare favorably with the majority of such curtains in use today. Wire adds to the tensile strength of the cloth, and of course it is calculated in a degree to prevent a curtain from ‘bellying’ as did that in the Iroquois... While the curtain was not of the best quality, I cannot credit the report that it was entirely destroyed or burned to bits. An asbestos theater curtain is not calculated long to withstand the attack of a great fire. It is designed more as a shield, and I have not a doubt that if promptly lowered it would have held the flames in check long enough to have allowed every man, woman and child to leave the theater in orderly fashion with plenty of time to spare.⁸⁴

That the curtain may have “crumbled up with the intense heat” — and that Trainer couldn’t “credit the report that it was entirely destroy or burned to bits” — led to speculation that the curtain was never treated with asbestos at all, a theory argued with particular force by Gustavus J. Johnson, a member of the Western Society of Engineers:

“I had a chance to examine a piece of this curtain after the fire,” he said, “and put it under a microscope. There was no difficulty in telling what it was made of. It would not have stood a fire. A good asbestos curtain has to be made with a wire netting backing, otherwise it will not hold together. They are expensive, not only on account of first cost, but because pure asbestos soon disintegrates and they have to be renewed.

It has been discovered that by mixing wood pulp with the asbestos fiber the life of the curtain is prolonged, the cost is cheapened, and the wire foundation can be dispensed with. It results in a curtain that may get inside the city ordinances, but is of no value in a fire...

Asbestos is only soluble in hydrochloric acid. Wood pulp is soluble in water if you leave it there long enough. Asbestos will withstand intense heat for a time. Wood pulp is highly inflammable.”⁸⁵

A particularly conspiratorial rumor insinuated that Davis and Powers had provided for the removal of the curtain from the building during the cleanup phase of the disaster recovery.

Another set of rumors the developed regarding the curtains pertained to reports from Iroquois survivors insist that it was never the asbestos curtain that lowered at all. Most particular are the accounts of Emma Schweitzler and Eva Gibson, who were in the fifth row of the orchestra circle. Schweitzler made it out of the theatre just fine, but Gibson was badly burned in the blaze. “The curtain that was run down,” Schwietzler said, “was the regular drop curtain painted with the ‘autumn scene’...It was the same curtain that was lowered before the show started and the same one sued during the interval following the first act...as soon as the drop curtain came down it caught fire.”⁸⁶ Schweitzler’s story is backed up to some extent by a description of the act drop in the Iroquois souvenir program as “a study rich and mellow in autumnal tints.”⁸⁷

A January 8th, 1903 *Tribune* article posits the same argument as Schweitzler: “the ‘asbestos’ curtain, intended for another purpose than for use in such an emergency, failed to drop. Another curtain, which had been dropped instead, caught fire and burned...”⁸⁸ The presence of the asbestos curtain would be a sticking point in the post-disaster paradigm because of stories like these, and though it is generally accepted that the asbestos curtain did, indeed, partially lower that afternoon, the problematic nature of conflicting accounts illustrates how

quickly stabilized definitions of reality were challenged during the disaster event and resultant post-disaster paradigm, and how the viral spread of misinformation can powerfully influence the historical record regarding disasters, making room for urban mythology and insinuation to appear alongside established fact.

The main problem with the asbestos curtain, though, is one that could be more generally applied to *all* asbestos curtains: there was no proper way to test their efficacy. A friend who had lost two nieces in the blaze asked John Ripley Freeman, an engineer and civic safety expert, to go to Chicago and “investigate means for rendering such fearful disaster impossible.”⁸⁹ Freeman wrote to John Howard Appleton, the city manager of Rochester, New York, about the difficulty of testing the effectiveness of asbestos curtains:

I have not yet found any satisfactory tests of fire curtain designed for use on theaters. It has been quite common to simply apply a flame from a plumber’s gasoline torch to one or two points on the curtain and to conclude that it was fire proof if it did not burn up. Such a test is totally inadequate to what the action of a curtain is likely to be when subjected all over to the fierce heat of a general stage fire.⁹⁰

Freeman’s point gets to the vital question of the illusion of safety in theatres. Even the highest-quality curtain degrades through use, so it is possible to re-construct any asbestos curtain as contributing to the mythology of safety in a much more significant way than the actuality of safety. The curtain at the Iroquois probably contained asbestos, but it was not a sturdy, well-constructed device, and the asbestos was likely of an inferior quality. However, Freeman’s point suggests that, even if the curtain were the finest kind, the inability of a disinterested third-party to rigorously and regularly test the quality of the asbestos in a standardized way suggests that the curtain was most effective as part of a narrative construct of safety in the minds of the audience.

Eddie Foy heard the commotion in his dressing room, and rushed onto the stage, half made-up. He had been preparing to return to the stage as Sister Anne. Some reports suggest that

Foy's return was being made in preparation for the skit entitled "Sister Anne and the Pet Elephant," which involved Foy's Anne parading around the stage with a two-person elephant costume, although the program of scenes lists the elephant scene as occurring precisely before *Pale Moonlight*.⁹¹ Most likely, the mistake was made because of Foy's bizarre half-human/half-elephant attire, as he had likely been removing the elephant costume when the fire began to break out.

As he came onstage, Foy extolled the audience to "keep very quiet. Don't get excited and don't stampede."⁹² He turned to Dillea in the orchestra pit. "Play something, anything," he demanded, and Dillea, "white as a ghost" struck up the overture to Klaw and Erlanger's spectacle from the previous season, *Sleeping Beauty and the Beast*.⁹³ Foy stood onstage, Chicago's favorite son, and what audience members remained began to applaud him for his calm demeanor.⁹⁴ The fire spread quickly and remorselessly, catching the grease paint on both the act and asbestos curtains, igniting the miles of hemp rope and scenery in the loft. Burning pieces of cloth and fabric began to rain down upon the stage, and Foy saw the fire "spread with a series of explosions."⁹⁵

William Carleton, the Stage Manager, later reported that Foy's pleas with the audience were "useless," and that the theatre had been plunged into darkness before Foy even made his way to the stage. Carleton's memory of the fire presents another example of the kind of contestation that defines the Iroquois disaster. In addition to claims that the theatre's lights had all blown out — a point I deny later in this chapter — he also claims that the elevator backstage that serviced the dressing rooms "was one of the first things to go wrong, and attempts to use it were futile."⁹⁶ Most other testimony agrees that the elevator ran well into the development of the fire, its operation providing one of the most heroic and unknown stories of the Iroquois.

Survivors described Robert Smith most often as “a little elevator boy.”⁹⁷ In the darkness created both by the smoke and the burned out electrical fuses, Smith made at least three trips up and down the floors of the Iroquois. Badly burned and with lungs full of smoke, Smith “wrapped wet towels around his hands and about his head, and kept his post until every girl was saved.”⁹⁸ As he travelled up and down in the elevator, chorus girls begged him not to leave them behind. “Keep cool and stay where you are,” he replied. “I will get you on my next trip and you will get out all right.”⁹⁹

At the bottom of the elevator shaft, at stage level, men formed a human chain through the darkness to safety; J. R. O’Mally, Archie Barnard, Arthur Hart and William Price were among the men using their bodies as guidance, even as their clothes and hair began to burn.¹⁰⁰ Chorus girls blindly groped their way along the flesh and sinew of this chain until they found rescue in the cold, fresh December evening.¹⁰¹ The first two trips went relatively smoothly, but Smith put himself at enormous peril during the final trip, venturing out into the dressing rooms in smoke and darkness, finding the girls and dragging them back to the elevator.¹⁰² Through three separate trips, the young elevator boy travelled into and out of darkness, collecting performers along the way, until he became so faint that he was bodily grabbed out of the elevator, and taken to safety himself. “It was hard work to keep it going,” he said. “I made as many trips as I could.”¹⁰³

A Pillar of Fire

This section recounts the two events within the disaster process that produced the greatest dangers, the disastrous back draft that blew a giant fireball into the audience, and the scramble for life over Couch Alley. Each of these events illustrates the architectural and managerial shortcomings that contributed to the severity of the disaster at the Iroquois and, in turn, contributed to the necessity for the post-disaster paradigmatic manipulation of memory-work by

elite-level forces through tropes of dispute. More so than Richmond or Brooklyn, the Iroquois Theatre disaster demonstrates that disaster remembrances are best understood through what Bos, Ullberg and 't Hart identify as “a product of a political encounter between grass-roots memory and the elite-level, political ‘processing’ of disasters.”¹⁰⁴ Relevant to the memory-work of the Iroquois Theatre, the processing of the disaster was marked most clearly by the numerous disputes about causes, effects, and, ultimately, about the legal assignation of guilt which, I argue in the next chapter, was never meaningfully achieved.

Onstage, the environment had grown too dangerous for Foy or the orchestra members to stay any longer. The orchestra made their escape under the stage through a special door, while Foy went for one of the stage doors. As he went, he was joined by many of the Grigolatis girls, and they made their escape. As Foy exited, the stage loft “collapsed and tons of fire poured over the stage.”¹⁰⁵ The sound was deafening, “like the booming of great guns” and “thunder bolts.”¹⁰⁶ He later wrote,

As I left the stage the last of the ropes holding up the drops burned through, and with them the whole loft collapsed with a terrifying crash, bringing down tons of burning material - and with that, all the lights in the house went out.¹⁰⁷

Other accounts reinforce Foy’s point. Tony Hatch writes,

With a roar that reverberated throughout the building, tons of wood, rope, sandbags, pipe, pulleys, lights, rigging and nearly 280- pieces of blazing scenery crash to the stage...with the force of a bomb, instantly knocking out the electrical switchboard and plunging the auditorium into darkness.¹⁰⁸

The wreckage of the rigging left “debris...a foot thick...twisted together, imbedded [sic] in a yielding mass of half burned scenery.”¹⁰⁹ It was most likely at this point in time that the stage was plunged into darkness and not, as Carleton remembered, before Eddie Foy made his way to the stage to plea for calm from the audience.

The large stage door had been thrown open, although precisely who did it remains a mystery.¹¹⁰ The open doors provided a convenient source of fuel to the fire that had, to this point, been largely contained to the stage area of the building. A backdraft is among the most perilous events a fire and rescue worker might face, occurring when oxygen is rapidly re-introduced into an oxygen-depleted environment. Lacking oxygen, combustion slows down while combustible fuel gases and smoke remain at temperatures above the ignition point. Technologies of fire safety are designed to work in tandem to create this environment of oxygen starvation, the goal being not the prevention of fire, but the mitigation of the danger of fire.

“My god man,” an employee shouted as the doors were opened. “What do you mean by opening those doors? This draft is as strong as a gale and the fire will be on top of the audience in a minute.” Though attempts were made to close the door, the effort was impossible, as “chorus girls made a mad dash for the exit and crowded the entrance.”¹¹¹ All accounts of the Iroquois agree that, onstage, the smoke was dense, black, and suffocating. Further evidence shows that the skylights installed above the stage area, which were designed to allow smoke to vent through the roofs in just such an event, “did not work on the day of the fire,” having been “fastened shut on the inside with wire lashes, and on the outside with a scantling brace.”¹¹² This oversight produced a perfect, oxygen-starved environment in which the fire could burn and smolder hotly, but not spread beyond the brick proscenium wall, and certainly not beyond the asbestos curtain, if it had worked correctly.

Badly untested, the technologies of safety that had been installed at the Iroquois failed in such catastrophic and cooperative ways that it almost defies logical or reasonable description. First, the asbestos curtain had failed to fall correctly. Thomas Delaney, a light operator in the theatre, testified, “in the scene just preceding the moonlight one, in which the fire broke out, we

had the trough of border lights swung out. It was at right angles with the wall, and when in that position, the curtain could not drop.”¹¹³ The lights were designed to, “when not in use, [to fit] into an excavation on the wall.”¹¹⁴ The curtain stopped about “fifteen to twenty feet above the stage” on the north side of the stage, stage right. Some accounts state that the curtain had also “bellied out” because of a gust of wind from the stage door being opened.

In the house, events had conspired in a perfect storm of disaster. Although the skylights onstage did not work, ventilation slots above the audience were operating, and working properly, providing a source of cool oxygen into the house. Weeks after the fire, Alfred C. Mace, the vice president of Coats and Burchard public appraisers, discovered a hollow chamber in the ceiling of the auditorium housing an electric fan.¹¹⁵ Mace’s theory suggested that the fan had been placed there to provide air circulation for the theatre, and had been running on the afternoon of the 30th. The fan’s enormous power helped suck the fire from the stage into the house, and upwards towards the ceiling, as evidenced by “the iron leaves of the fan melted in places.”¹¹⁶

Through the “yawning space of many feet” beneath the asbestos curtain, among “dark, gloomy, smoke concealed chaos,” the oxygen rich blast of air from open doors gave new life to the smoldering fire, blasting it like “a horizontal volcano” from the stage into the house.¹¹⁷ Those in the first few rows who had remained seated patiently were instantly consumed by the eruption, which had branched from the stage “in a semi-circle...scarcely the distance of thirty feet.” The upholstery of the chairs was ignited and destroyed.¹¹⁸ Beyond that area, responders would find groups of people unburned, but dead in their seats: the blast of fire was so powerful that it had sucked the oxygen out of their lungs, asphyxiating them in a “mass of flame,” a “withering blast of death.”¹¹⁹

Of all of the horror inside the building, none is so grim as what transpired in Couch Alley. The scene would become the focal point of numerous urban myths about the fire. Alice Kilroy, like many in the audience, a schoolteacher, was one of those jammed four-deep in standing-room only, house right, three or four seats in, with her sister. At the first signs of fire, Kilroy whispered to her sister through the darkness “even if there is no fire, let us go out in the exit.”¹²⁰ The immediacy of Kilroy’s narrative underscores precisely how quickly the fire got out of control: by the time she and her sister had reached a fire escape, the heat had already grown so intense they could not bear to re-enter the building, and when they couldn’t make their way down the stairs, they found re-entry into the theatre was blocked by people trying to get *out*. Escape was impossible — the double-doors installed on the fire escape were arranged in such a way that the outer doors swung outwards at ninety degrees to the limn, so people on the third floor could not get past the open door on the second. A later investigation undertaken by the Coroner’s office would suggest that the “doors are much too small, they should have been three times as large,” according to Juror Finn, and required an ordinary sized man to stoop to pass through.¹²¹ Further, “the level of the floor” of the theatre is “two feet above the platform at the escape,” the *Tribune* reported. “Not knowing that this drop existed, the women and children fell as they tried to step out. Others trampled on them.”¹²²

Stuck for almost six minutes on the fire escape, Kilroy reported water began to fall on their heads — perhaps snow on the roof melting due to the intensity of the flames — refreshing them and providing some relief from the heat. Across Couch Alley stood the Tremont building, owned by Northwestern University. That afternoon, students and painters alike were at work in the building. Fred H. Rea, a Northwestern student, corroborates Kilroy’s account. “I saw at least three persons try to pass down the fire escape from the top landing,” he reported,

But they were unable to do so, because at the second landing from the top the doors were not swung clear back against the wall. The doors were at right angles to the wall, and through the exit smoke was pouring and part of the time flames.¹²³

When they became aware of the mortal peril of the people on the fire escape, painters “pushed ladders and boards across the gap to rescue those trapped on [the] fire platform.”¹²⁴ About a dozen people made it across safely — Kilroy claims she was the last — before “a pillar of fire” shot out of the Iroquois and “dashed itself against the wall of the university building.”¹²⁵ Many accepted their fates, and “jumped voluntarily” into the alley, smashing against the ground below, while others were pushed over the railings in the jostle for position on the tiny iron platform.¹²⁶ This grim cascade of bodies grew quickly and violently, blood gushing, bones snapping, and lungs constricting under the weight of dozens of other bodies, until the pile of dead reached almost ten-feet high.¹²⁷ At this height, survivors reported, the pile reduced the distance to the platforms to “an easy distance of six feet,” and other victims of the fire began to use the dead as a cushion to safety.¹²⁸

The fate of patrons inside was no better. Audience members searched for an exit, many of which were hidden behind red curtains, so as not to disturb the aesthetic of the design of the theatre. Others remained stuck by the difficulties trying to use a European-style lock with which Americans were unfamiliar, slowing progress and egress. Ushers, badly trained — if, indeed, trained at all, as many claimed they were not — had abandoned their posts at the first sign of danger.¹²⁹ Perhaps the deadliest design flaws were the inward-opening doors. As patrons struggled with the locks, panicked crowds of victims behind them smashed up against the door. Bodies were trampled as the crush of humanity tried to move ever forward, a grim meeting of the immovable object and the unstoppable force.

Most egregious, however, were the padlocked iron gates blocking off hallways leading from the second and third floors to the foyer; George M. Dusenberry, Head Usher and Superintendent of the auditorium, would later testify that the “four to five feet high gates” were removed in the hours following the fire.¹³⁰ The gates folded up, accordion-style, between acts to allow patrons to attend to their needs during act breaks, but otherwise were in place to prevent those in the “cheap seats” from sneaking down into the orchestra seating section. Dusenberry himself had been the one to lock the gates.

The doors, the gates, and the alley were the three biggest sites of death at the Iroquois, although the stairways in the magnificent foyer, as with Richmond and Brooklyn, were just as problematic. Although the stairways did not collapse under the weight of humanity, the designs caused incredible problems for those trying to escape. Instead of separate staircases servicing the different levels of seating, the left and right staircases came together at right angles on a landing in the middle of the foyer at the second level, and from there extended upwards in either direction to the third floor. The staircases were obviously designed with the philosophy of “seeing and being seen,” in order to benefit the Iroquois’ position as the social highlight of the city, and not in providing the readiest and most opportunity for escape.

Drawings of the lobby, as well as photos published in the *Tribune*, show that each grand staircase was composed of no fewer than five landings leading from the ground floor to the dress circle, each of which had benches. At the dress circle, patrons could walk three or four steps upwards into the auditorium, or hang a ninety degree turn and ascend three or four more stairs to the second floor balcony. From the balcony, there was another set of stairs leading to *another* clearing, and then a final set of stairs to the gallery seating. Again, in order to enter into the gallery seating area, patrons had to climb a final, small set of stairs — two or three steps. The

aesthetic effect was symmetrical and beautiful, but the logistics of these stairs were nightmarish. As with the fire escapes, the small set of stairs leading into the second and third floor seating caused numerous people to lose their footing as they rushed out of the auditorium, and into the lobby, bodies piled *en masse*.

The architectural design by Marshall contributed to the severity of the disaster through the poor safety considerations undertaken in the design of the lobby, the proper operation of the skylights, and the extremely poor construction of the fireproof escapes. Choices made by the management, including the installation of padlocked iron gates on the second and third floors, the purchase and use of the ineffective fire retardant Kilfyre by house fireman Sallers, and the covering up of exits to preserve the aesthetic beauty of the building, made obvious and powerful contributions to the severity of the disaster that unfolded in the Iroquois. Such choices implied institutional guilt, and it was the job of John Traeger, Chicago Coroner, to lead the investigation that would work to identify the guilty parties. However, his work was greatly complicated by the governmental and corporate interests of the City and of the Theatrical Syndicate. In the post-disaster paradigmatic reconstruction of the event, the long, contentious, and bitter legal disputes that played out over the course of many years profoundly impacted grass-roots attempts to keep the memory of the Iroquois alive, issues explored in the following two chapters.

Part III, Chapter 10: Terrible Catastrophe Which Has Befallen

Like Grass After a Storm

The Iroquois disaster shares rhetorical similarities with the fires at Richmond and Brooklyn insofar as the disaster's disruptive influence was understood to extend beyond the walls of the theatre and into the normal systems of order that defined life in Chicago. This chapter identifies the tropes of dispute and contestation that were used in the immediate post-disaster by religious, social and civic actors. Primarily, this chapter argues that the lengthy and bitterly contested legal struggle between managers of the Iroquois, the city of Chicago, and advocates for victims of the blaze, which resulted in a mostly failed attempt to assign guilt, served as the primary agent in defining the initial the memory-work of the disaster as marked with dispute and contestation. This first section identifies religious negotiations of the event through analysis of sermons delivered in the city immediately following the fire.

As in Richmond and Brooklyn, the fire re-wrote the space immediately surrounding the theater, reconstructing it from a fashionable, profitable bastion of Chicago's social life into a large-scale morgue and, eventually, into a site of shared performances of grief. There's an interesting parallel here to the action onstage in *Mr. Blue Beard*; as a New Year's Eve article in the *Chicago Tribune* put it, recognizing the capacity of disaster to re-write reality, "Bluebeard's chamber of horrors suddenly became a reality...it is the quick change from laughter to unutterable terror and woe which makes a theater fire so terrifying."¹³¹

The fire lasted approximately fifteen minutes. "In those few minutes," a report in *Lest We Forget* states,

Obscure people had evolved into heroes; staid business men drove out patrons to convert their stores into temporary hospitals and morgues; others converted their trucks and delivery wagons into improvised ambulances; stocks of drugs, oils and blankets were

showered upon the police to aid in relief work and a corps of physicians and surgeons sufficient to the needs of an army had organized.¹³²

Note that the report begins to play upon themes of tension and opposition by describing the disaster's disruptive powers to transform "obscure people" into "heroes" and describing normally "staid business men" throwing out customers. Downtown Chicago had no hospital to service the victims of the fire, so all of downtown Chicago became a hospital; over a hundred medical students from Rush University Medical College, armed with equipment, made their way downtown by street car and police wagon; clergy and other medical officials made their way, as well, prepared to offer help or, failing that, last rites to the dying.

The early response to the disaster was chaotic and unorganized, as "all manner of vehicles were given freely for the removal of dead and injured."¹³³ As bodies were transported out of the wreckage of the theatre, they were removed to buildings in the Loop that were converted into triage centers and morgues. Thompson's Restaurant, "adjoining the theatre," was turned into "a charnel house, with its fumbled heaps of corpses...bodies were everywhere."¹³⁴ Marshall Field's, a major Chicago department store, was made "an improvised hospital."¹³⁵ The Sherman House, a hotel, was "thrown open to fire victims, and all the injured taken in were provided with rooms and medical attention."¹³⁶ The disruptive power of disaster is evident in these responses. The buildings became spaces other than what they had been in the minutes before the disaster occurred, newly significant shrines to public suffering. When those buildings were too full, or the methods of transportation not quick enough to account for the removal of bodies from the Iroquois, bodies were, instead, simply piled on "the sidewalk in front of the playhouse."¹³⁷

This chaos of the rescue efforts was not helped by the dark and miasmatic interior of the theatre, "dark and still as a tomb," with "water dripping everywhere," standing "inches deep."¹³⁸ The priority was finding survivors, if there were any. One of the worst areas was the balcony,

where bodies were “so terribly interwoven that it was impossible at first to take any one out.”¹³⁹

William Townsend, the Second Assistant Fire Marshall, went into the building to join the men of Engines 134 and 40. “I entered the parquet with those engine companies and put that fire out,” he would testify later,

I then discovered the fire in the first and second balconies, and put the fire out up there, and I found several bodies...on the first balcony the bodies were piled up all along the passage behind the back seats and at the exits on what we call the south side of the building...They were crowded in the door, lying on each other three or four deep. They were also outside the door in the entrance as we went into the gallery. We found a man and a woman in the passageway that extends behind the entrances to the gallery. The door proper was crowded with them on the inside, and in the passageway behind the seats, and we found bodies in all of the aisles.¹⁴⁰

The Chief of Police, Francis O’Neill, described the scene at the balcony with a brutal lyricism: “if you ever saw a field of timothy grass blown flat by the wind and rain of a summer storm,” he said, “that was the position of the dead at the exits of the second balcony.”¹⁴¹ Similar to O’Neill’s use of natural imagery, the *Chicago Tribune* evoked images of natural disasters in order to bring an understanding to the fire at the Iroquois, comparing it to a whirlpool, playing, again, upon the rhetorical tropes of opposition and contestation that were embedded within the social context of the disaster environment by juxtaposing the inherent opposition between fire and water. They went so far as to term the crush of humanity on the balcony “the contrary tides.” The paper described,

The raging tide of humanity pouring out of the east entrance of the balcony during the panic had met the fighting, struggling crowd coming down the stairs from the third balcony at right angles. The two streams formed a whirlpool which ceased its onward progress and remained there on the landing where people stamped each other under foot in that mad circle of death...In a short time the blockade in the fatal angle must have been complete. Then into this awful heap still plunged the contrary tides of humanity from each direction. Many tried to crawl over the top of the heap, but were drawn down into the grinding mill of death underneath. The smoke was heavy at the fatal angle, for a majority of those taken out at that point bore no marks of bruises.¹⁴²

In the chaos, as doctors and police officials tried to control the flow of bodies — both dead and alive — into and out of theatre and into and out of makeshift medical centers. It was impossible to account for everyone, as the dead were transported to any building in which there was space to hold them in “patrol wagons, ambulances, trucks and delivery wagons.”¹⁴³ Bodies went missing, demonstrated nowhere so well as the story that, several days later, a man in Evanston sought a burial permit, after having “wrapped the dead body of his wife in his overcoat and carried it to Evanston, many miles away.”¹⁴⁴

The team of first responders, aided by a group of reporters, formed an assembly line to deal with the dead. “It was necessary first to take the dead from the top of the pile,” described Chief O’Neill, “then the rest of the bodies were lifted easily and regularly from their position, save as their arms had intertwined and clutched.”¹⁴⁵ Whenever a fireman would hear moaning or sense shifting in the mass of bodies, he would work quickly to extricate the body. The *Tribune* describes,

The workers fell back and the fireman crawled over the heap and was helped out. He ran down the stairs three steps at a time to get the child to a place where help might be given before it was too late. Then other firemen from inside the theater passed out more bodies, which were handed from one policeman to another until someone on the outside of the heap could take the dead and carry them downstairs.¹⁴⁶

G. Frank Lydston, a Chicago area urologist and writer, had answered the call for help that afternoon. Lydston arrived at the theatre “only a few moments” after the fire had erupted and panic had prevailed, the air in the theatre only “barely breathable.” Lydston followed “several firemen groping their way up one of the marble stairways.”¹⁴⁷ The air still smoke-filled, and with the acrid scent of burning flesh lingering, Lydston and the firemen reached the top of the stairs, “on the landing just outside the only door that was open in the front of the theater,” and found “a solid, monstrous cube of human bodies, as high as one could reach.”¹⁴⁸ Unobstructed on two

sides, the mass was propped on one side against the wall of the stairway, and behind it by another pile of bodies of “human beings who had tried to climb over those in front and failed,” which reached from the lobby to “the lower balcony rail within the theater.”¹⁴⁹ As firefighters climbed the heap and tried to extricate individuals, they found the task both gruesome and impossible: the bodies were practically fused together by pressure and heat. Many patrons in the second and third levels had accepted the inevitability of their deaths, and, rather than face the human crush, opted to take their own lives, or the lives of their children, illustrated by the fact that, “mothers in frantic despair threw their babes over the balcony railing to the main floor below.”¹⁵⁰

In the theatre, the men worked tirelessly, until all of the bodies had been excavated and removed, and the smoky miasma had cleared. “The awful scenes of the Iroquois Theatre had been wiped away,” the *Tribune* reported, “except in the memory of those who beheld them.”¹⁵¹ That, however, wasn’t true; the bodies may have been removed, and the physical damage may have been cleaned, but the awful scenes of the Iroquois Theatre would continue to haunt public memory for years to come. Indeed, “the awful scenes of the Iroquois Theatre” that “had been wiped away” proved to greatly complicate the legal struggles for memory between elite-level forces and grass-roots communities when the time came to assign guilt and responsibility for the disaster. The earliest emergency response to the disaster, and the reporting of that response, was already beginning to pick up on the tensions inherent in the tropes of dispute that marked the Iroquois Theatre, between attempting to re-construct the space of the theatre to a pre-disaster status and the impossibility of a successful re-signification of the space. These tropes would come to define the resultant memory-work of the disaster, played out most visibly in a lengthy

and contentious series of legal battles, but also in the immediate negotiation of the disaster in newspapers and public statements by Theatrical Syndicate employees.

Moral and Civic Responsibility

In the early stage of re-constructing the disaster event for the sake of memorializing the dead, condolences began to pour in from all over the world, assuring Chicagoans that they were not suffering alone.¹⁵² President Teddy Roosevelt sent his personal condolences on behalf of all Americans to Mayor Harrison: “In common with all our people throughout this land I extend through you to the people of Chicago my deepest sympathy in the terrible catastrophe which has befallen them,” he wrote.¹⁵³ The Iroquois disaster was constructed as shared not just by Chicagoans, but also by the entire world. This section identifies the initial performances undertaken by individuals and civic institutions in response to the disaster, and illustrates how the memory-work began to be marked by institutional contention rather than social solidarity, resulting in a highly politicized re-construction of the Iroquois disaster, which would contribute to the ways in which the fire would be remembered and forgotten.

Significantly, the Iroquois Theatre fire’s post-disaster paradigm moved quickly from public performances of shared grief to contentious legal investigations of the event. Where Richmond and Brooklyn saw a rise in social solidarity, empowered by publicly-funded social rituals, like funeral rites, Chicago’s initial response was considerably less public and shared: funerals were mostly private affairs, and the Mayor and the Coroner began a fairly public argument about what to do with victim’s bodies just days after the fire, which played out in letters published in the *Tribune*. This section illustrates the funeral rites and the beginning of civic influence on the memory of the event, arguing that elite-level actors operated immediate and significant influence

on memory-work through their public disputes between each other, contributing to a construction of the disaster as essentially and significantly contested.

The disaster completely re-wrote what would otherwise have been a typically bawdy Chicago New Year's celebration. Mayor Harrison issued a proclamation to the city requesting solemn peace and quiet:

On each recurring New Year's Eve annoyance has been caused to the sick and infirm by the indulgence of thoughtless persons in noisy celebrations of the passage of the old year.

The city authorities have at all times discouraged this practice, but now, when Chicago lies in the shadow of the greatest disaster in her history for a generation, noise making, whether by bells, whistles, cannon, horns, or any other means, is particularly objectionable.

As Mayor of Chicago, I would therefore request all persons to refrain from this indulgence, and I would particularly ask all railway officials and all persons in control of factories, boats, and mills to direct their employees not to blow whistles between the hours of 12 and 1 o'clock tonight.

CARTER H. HARRISON, Mayor¹⁵⁴

The proclamation was probably superfluous; it seemed unimaginable that the pall cast over the city would rise anytime soon, and Chicagoans entered the New Year of 1904 in solemn reflection. The *New York Times* reported on the 1st of the New Year that Chicagoans followed this request: "overwhelmed by the extent of yesterday's disaster in the Iroquois Theatre, the stricken citizens of Chicago to-night are allowing the old year to go and the new to come without any traditional manifestations of joy."¹⁵⁵

The funeral processions were almost entirely private affairs as opposed to the shared mourning rituals performed in Richmond and Brooklyn. This had the effect of contributing to the construction of grief not as shared and social, as in Richmond and Brooklyn, but as private, disrupting the value and importance of publicly sharing and performing grief. Anne Eyre argues,

Moving forward from disaster physically and symbolically is about more than acknowledging suffering and giving survivors an opportunity to tell their story through commemorative rituals. It is also about establishing legal and political processes to address objectively, openly and honestly the causes of events and the accountability of all involved. This is a necessary condition for the learning of lessons and mitigation of future risks.¹⁵⁶

Eyre's insight ties together the sociological importance of public and ritualized performances with the legal processes that result from disaster events. Understood through her insight, the privatization of the funeral processions conflicted with the need to define "legal and political processes" in a way that ensured victims and survivor communities had their voices heard. In the privatization of the funeral rites, then, it is possible to identify a performance of the tropes of dispute and contestation between elite-level and grass-roots survivor communities that marked the memory-work of the Iroquois Theatre. The lack of highly public and visible performances of shared grief contributed to what Eyre identifies as the manipulation of memory "for the purposes of socially constructing a community's past and the design of its future."¹⁵⁷ In this case, the manipulation of memory was undertaken as the result of the city's association with guilt through incompetence and failure to ensure safety for Iroquois Theatre patrons.

"Funeral corteges...moved through" the snow-covered streets from house to house, carrying their grim loads. "Such a New Year's day of mourning Chicago never before had known, and the saddest scenes were found in the homes where funeral services were held."¹⁵⁸ As the corteges plodded through Chicago's streets, some families continued their search for their missing loved ones:

Of all the heartrending scenes attending the claiming of Chicago's dead, the most mutely pathetic was reserved for New Year's day in the coroner's office in the Criminal court building. Until long after midnight the halls echoed to the tread of the stragglers of the army of the stricken — the remnant of the unfortunate throng so luckless as to find no familiar feature among the dead, and who had come at last to tracing the missing by a process of elimination among the forms charred beyond recognition...When a sob or a

groan sounded from out the press of visitors it was a sign that for some poor soul the quest had ended.¹⁵⁹

Unlike Richmond and Brooklyn before it, the Iroquois disaster did not produce an enormous amount of unidentifiable bodies, a rare point of departure from the dispute that otherwise marked the fire. A January 3rd article in the *Tribune* suggests that, by that day, Mayor Harrison, Coroner Traeger, and Henry Foreman, President of the Board of Cook County Commissioners met to “formulate [plans] for a public funeral to be held this week in the Auditorium or other suitable hall over the remains of the dozen or less victims still unclaimed.”¹⁶⁰ The same article notes that “it is proposed that the unidentified be interred in some prominent cemetery and a monument erected to mark the spot.”¹⁶¹ “Vastly different from the Iroquois horror,” one article read, considering the comparison between Chicago and Brooklyn, “most of the victims of the Brooklyn Theater were burned beyond recognition.”¹⁶² By January 5th, “all but four of the Iroquois theater victims had been identified.”¹⁶³ There was no need for a large-scale public funeral similar to the ones held by Richmond and Brooklyn and, thus, a reduced opportunity to participate in the shared and social negotiation of grief via the disaster’s tendency toward reality disruption and reconstruction.

There were some rhetorical attempts to create opportunities for performing grief publically. Dr. Emil G. Hirsch, a Luxembourg-born Professor of Rabbinical studies at the University of Chicago, was busy as 1904 dawned, providing solace to victims’ family members at private funerals. “We must be brave and try and bear our misfortune,” he told parents and family members. “Hundreds of hearts are weeping today, but the dead cannot be brought to life. Be strong, dear parents. Others are suffering today and we are all sorrowing with you.”¹⁶⁴ Hirsch identified solidarity and love as the primary lessons that could stem from the disaster, while

cautioning against the arrogance that he identified creeping up in the years since the Great Chicago Fire:

Why, O God, in your infinite mercy, did you choose our fair city to be the scene of this devastating blast of fire? Was it to teach us that we have not yet won our boasted victory over your almighty forces of nature? Was it not to teach us to lean to you for protection and to abandon our own resources in the fight for life?

In his inscrutable wisdom, my friends, God has sent us this messenger of death with a mission. Not for naught was the song turned into the sob, and the voice of mirth into the cry of mourning.

Our fair city has been clothed in the sackcloth and ashes of sorrow. Let these 700 lives be consecrated as a lesson from above. May it teach us how small, how infinitesimal is the hand of man. Let it show us how frail is his wisdom, and how restricted his power.

This common grief, this one cloak of mourning that covers us all, will teach us to love one another. It will make us kind to the poor and merciful, to the needy. If this is the true prophecy, these poor young souls will not have departed in vain.¹⁶⁵

Hirsch's insight about the power of commonly shared grief to form new communities is one echoed by disaster sociologists. The performative aspects of the civic commemoration rites produce an environment for the creation, growth and sustenance of social solidarity. Such memorial practices demonstrate an inscription of institutional value to the lost lives of the victims: *you matter to us, and we will remember you*. Civic funeral processions allow mourners to come together and express grief and solidarity, to construct, as Hirsch said, a "common grief"; no such civic commemorative practice occurred in Chicago after the Iroquois. Owing to this, in comparison to the large-scale civic funeral services that accompanied the preceding conflagrations, the Iroquois Theatre disaster had a much smaller window of opportunity for the development of disaster related civic solidarity, which contributed to the quick shift from mourning the departed to the dominant memory work involving legal investigations into identifying causes, effects, and assigning blame. The desire — indeed, the *need* — for a civic commemoration of the victims was lost on political and corporate machines preoccupied with

their own safety and sustenance as the public's furious sentiment came into focus through Coroner Traeger's investigations.

That Chicagoans *needed* an opportunity to share their grief is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than when, six months later, the final, unidentified body of the Iroquois victims was laid to rest in Montrose Cemetery on Sunday, June 12th, 1904. The woman — approximately fifty years old at the time of her death — had been held in the county morgue while “many an anxious seeker after a lost mother or relative...looked at the body and turned away with a shake of the head.”¹⁶⁶ “That it is possible for an individual to pass from earth without being missed by a single friend of acquaintance illustrates the tragedy of life in a great city,” lamented a May 29th, 1907 article in the *Tribune*, writing about the Iroquois Memorial Association's plans to construct a monument at her grave.¹⁶⁷ The woman, the *Tribune* reported, was “unknown, but not friendless”; her last rites were attended by five hundred people, the closest approximation to an opportunity for civic solidarity and shared grief Chicagoans would get in the immediate post-disaster paradigm.¹⁶⁸

This whiplash, from disaster to funerals to political machination, was helped, no doubt, by the speed with which Traeger began his inquest and, in doing so, politicized the disaster powerfully. A throwaway line of description in a January 2nd *Tribune* article notes that “the coroner was hastening the work of disposing of the dead,” and by the 3rd, the *Tribune* was reporting that Traeger had written the following to Harrison:

At this time, after a careful examination of the situation, I am of the opinion that the remains of some of the victims of the Iroquois theater disaster are disfigured in a manner that will prevent recognition by relatives and friends, and, consequently, will be left unclaimed.

Knowing the heartfelt sympathy of the people of our city and the entire world toward those who have so suddenly been bereft of their loved ones, and especially towards those who may be compelled to bear the added grief of being unable to recover the bodies of those dear to them. I feel that it would be fitting to have the city of Chicago take charge

of the funeral of the unknown victims that they may be borne to their last resting place by the loving hands of a sympathetic people.

With that end in view, I would respectfully request that you cooperate with me in the appointment of a committee of citizens to take charge of the funeral arrangements, and would suggest that you advise me at once of your action in the matter.¹⁶⁹

In his letter, Traeger identified the need, and the lack, of an opportunity for Chicagoans to participate in the symbolically vital ritual of attending and participating in a shared performance of grief. In doing so, however, Traeger politicized the memory-work of the post-disaster paradigm; it is difficult not to read a kind of bitterness in the letter about the lack of elite-level response to the disaster. For his part, Carter Harrison responded with resistance to Traeger's request, equally contributing to the politics of the disaster, and marking the memory-work as significantly contentious. Harrison wrote,

I shall cooperate with the coroner in any way that will be possible. We should wait as long as possible before burying any unidentified person. Probably a large proportion of them were strangers passing through Chicago. Their deaths may not become known to their friends for some time, as they were traveling. The bodies should not, in my opinion, be buried before it is absolutely necessary.¹⁷⁰

The fractious internal tensions of elite-level government officials concerning the handling of victims, and the lack of socially shared performances of grief contributed powerfully to a sociological construction of the disaster as Harrison denies Traeger's suggestion that Chicago take responsibility for the dead. This is by way of suggesting that the dynamic between elite-level and grass-roots narratives may, itself, be understood as a product of dispute, contestation, and negotiation. The Iroquois disaster — and so, the memory of the disaster — became the subject of contention between a grass-roots victim community through the Iroquois Memorial Association, and the elite-level negotiations of the proximate and legal causes of the disaster between John Traeger, his jury, and the management of the Iroquois Theatre.

The Vicarious Atonement

Contributing greatly to the use of themes of dispute, opposition, and contestation were the responses by members of Chicago's clergy. Religious responses to the Iroquois disaster specifically identified the government as responsible for creating the environment in which the disaster process could develop with terrible severity. While the civic and social portion of the blame game played out in the pages of newspapers, religious figures offered invective suggesting the contributions human and institutional greed had made to the disaster. In Richmond, the religious response revealed a deep-seeded anxiety towards, and hatred for, the practice of theatre. In Brooklyn, the religious response was gentler towards the institution of theatre, primarily focused on encouraging the citizens to live their lives as a memorial to the dead. In Chicago, the religious response was a forthright condemnation against governmental institutions. The fire wasn't the result of God's will, it was a reflection of the "official negligence and civic lawlessness" that had created the lax and money-mad environment in which the obvious structural defects of the building could be overlooked.¹⁷¹ In this way, religious responses to the Iroquois disaster served the interests of grass-roots victim communities in a way unseen in Richmond or Brooklyn.

"Out of this cruel event, we are already beginning to see some rays of hope," preached William Robson Notman.

It has given a staggering blow to a type of brutal commercialism which is the blight of our fair civilization, inasmuch as it values dollars much and human lives little. For what does it matter in the eyes of our soulless speculators whether human lives are jeopardized or not, provided a few dollars are made or saved? ...What shall it profit a man, or a corporation either, if the whole world be gained and the soul lost and what will a corporation give in exchange for its soul? This catastrophe may help to reverse our standard of values, and men may never again be rated higher than dollars...for years our innocent and trusting citizens have been spending their evenings in veritable deathtraps. They have been doing this on the assumption that those in authority had safeguarded them against danger.¹⁷²

The “brutal commercialism” Notman identifies suggests that *Blue Beard* — and, by extension, members of the Theatrical Syndicate — was indeed defined by membership of the Nation of Money. Notman’s critique, based on the economic valuation of a human life, reads as almost prescient in a contemporary society where corporate personhood is a matter of public debate. Further, Notman suggests the evil of the Iroquois management was at least partially because the implied contract patrons make with the theatre was entered into without fully informed consent and transparency of the potential dangers in which the patrons would place themselves.

Samuel Fallows — who had offered his aid at the site of the disaster — made it clear that justice needed to be served as swiftly as possible, but that the citizens of Chicago had to take it upon themselves to ensure justice continued to be served long after the disaster process had passed:

In the name of these disfigured and departed hundred who were “martyrs by the pang, without the palm,” and for the sake of the hundreds of thousands who will flock to places of public rest, the demand of the world today is “let no guilty man escape.” It is not for me to sit in judgment upon any one. The legally appointed investigators will render their verdict in due time. But when punishment has been meted out and this fearful occurrence becomes a memory only, shall we criminally forget the past? Shall we relax our vigilance, and through negligence, or greed, or bribery permit death traps to remain or to be erected in apartment buildings, manufactories, hotels, or theaters? God forbid.¹⁷³

Notably, Fallows later authored the foreword to *Lest We Forget*, the disaster book published in response to the Iroquois fire. His writing there provides an opportunity for a cross-temporal conversation with himself. This conversation illustrates a subtle shift in his feelings towards, and interpretation of, the fire. Specifically, Fallows considers the implications of calling the victims of the fire “martyrs by the pang, without the palm,” a suggestion that their deaths were in vain. He would later write,

...I said in my haste, "you all are martyrs by the pang without the palm." I do not say it now. Martyrs indeed they were, by the criminal neglect of recreant man. But the palm is theirs. They have saved others, themselves they could not save. Thousands, perhaps millions, will in the future be secure in their places of resort, because these went on that fateful day to their inevitable doom. Mayors, architects, fire-inspectors, managers, stage carpenters, electricians, ushers and chiefs of police in every city have had their duty burned into their inmost consciousness by this consuming fire.¹⁷⁴

The shift in Fallows' thinking illustrates how meaning is destabilized and recreated in the disruption of the post-disaster paradigm. Whereas, in the immediate aftermath of the blaze, Fallows angrily suggested the victims' deaths were in vain, he would later come to recognize the productive contribution they made through death towards rousing an apathetic society to demand more strict enforcement of fire codes. This small act of definitional shifting handily illustrates how themes of dispute and contestation served to write and re-write grass-roots memory work related to the disaster.

Frank G. Smith suggested that the fire was, indeed, God's justice, but that the justice was directed not at the victims, but towards those whose "greed and carelessness" had caused the fire to occur. Fire, he argued, was not always inherently marked by its relationship to danger and disaster, and served many useful purposes. Instead, it was the environment of apathy that allowed the disaster to occur. Further, Smith argued, the disruption provided by post-disaster paradigm was an opportunity for God-fearing citizens to ensure their own justice be done:

Perhaps the greatest blessing this city enjoys today is the blessing of fire. It is that small fire around which our 100,000 poor huddle today that keeps them from freezing and death. But it is greed and carelessness that tramples upon God's great laws given for our good and the fire darts forth and a world is shocked by the great truth that judgment is automatic and that the penalties of divine law, ruthlessly broken, are self-registering.

It is but right that the hand of justice should be laid upon every man who is in any way responsible for this tragedy.

I believe this morning that our love for God and men should tighten the grasp and that men should be taught that the laws of God and the state and the municipality cannot be trampled upon with impunity.¹⁷⁵

Similarly, William O. Shepard noted that the fire offered a metaphorical opportunity to cleanse corruption from the city. While Fallows struggled to construct meaning from the massacre, Shepard was quick to identify that the victims of the blaze had not died in vain, because their deaths would ensure greater safety for those who remained:

Those who mourn today suffer vicariously, that other may gain. We may not be able to understand how fully we shall be gainers, but it is to be hoped that the entire city will be a cleaner city — in official and citizen — because of this calamity. Such a disaster can never occur again. Our lives will be safer because these lives have been lost.¹⁷⁶

While most clerical responses tried to define God's relationship to the fire, Frederick C. Preist went so far as to deny God's presence in the event at all. Instead, Preist argued, the fire was the inevitable result of humans operating their own free will. The argument Preist creates here is similar to Smith's in that it casts guilt on humanity for their contributions to creating the environment that allowed the disaster to occur:

Do not ascribe the calamity to the Almighty. He did not do it. Indeed, he did all he could do, consistent with human freedom to prevent it...Ascribe it to men. Ascribe it to men's disregard of law. Ascribe it to the indifferent and vicious disregard of human and divine requirements, which, to the shame of Chicago, we must confess is much too common here.... Every citizen of Chicago who has sympathized with or shown unreasonable leniency towards the law breaking classes in the city bears a share of responsibility for that disregard of law and its awful consequences. He has encouraged men to believe that they could flagrantly disregard the mandates of law, human and divine, without serious danger.¹⁷⁷

Dr. Cleland B. McAfee noted the irony of the government's closing of seventeen theatres in the wake of the disaster, suggesting that such an action only reinforced the notion that the government had failed to properly safeguard those buildings against potential disaster:

There is a sad irony in closing seventeen theaters for a defect which is so well known that the evidence on which they are closed is simply the files of the department charged with responsibility. We are already seeing the dreary spectacle of one man, or one department, or one agency pointing to another and saying, "It is your fault"...lives were committed to incompetent hands, and we have paid the price.¹⁷⁸

Taken together, these religious responses illustrate a radical shift over one hundred years in the relationship between religion and theatre. By placing the blame for the disaster on governmental and managerial institutions, the religious leaders of Chicago deny any inherent evil in the practice of theatrical production, and suggest instead that the evil existed in a city rife with corruption and graft. In the moment of extricating God from the event, the religious response argues that man and man alone is responsible for the disaster, and that man and man alone must find a way to overcome the traumatic loss of life. The contentious and confrontational tone of these responses is clear: religious leaders centralized dispute as a tool for moving forward, arguing that “the indifferent and vicious disregard” that served to create a disaster-rich environment must be fought against to ensure such a disaster would never take place again.

Part III, Chapter 11: A Lamentable Lack of Force

Willfully and Maliciously Endeavoring

“The paradox of disaster politics in democracies,” write Bos, Ullberg, and ’t Hart,

Is that as more and more information about disasters becomes public as assertive victim communities and other stakeholders work the democratic process and employ its checks and balances on government power to investigate, it becomes harder instead of easier to arrive at some form of joint remembrance and consensual history writing, and thus create some space for society to “forget”.¹⁷⁹

The difficulty of the kind of joint remembrance and consensual history writing Bos, Ullberg and ’t Hart identify stems from my central argument that narrative tropes are employed at each level of a social strata in order to operate control over descriptions and memory of the disaster event, meaning that disasters are essentially contested terrain. The contestation in defining the disaster begins to occur immediately in the post-disaster paradigm, and operates broad influence over how a disaster will be remembered. The writing of disaster histories is inherently fraught with political and sociological dimensions, and the contestation and dispute between narratives of the disaster problematize or prevent “joint remembrance and consensual history writing.” This chapter is concerned with the processes underlying the contestation of political and sociological dimensions of memory relative to the Iroquois blaze through examining how blame was assigned, shifted, and negotiated by various groups of actors through the pages of newspapers, official inquiries into the fire, and, finally, the failed attempts to place blame. These failures, I argue, played upon the themes of dispute and opposition, and, ultimately, served to “create some space for society to forget.” Significantly, while Boss, Ullberg and ’t Hart suggest creating space for forgetting is a good thing, in the case of the Iroquois Theatre, I argue that the created space must be understood as what Paul Ricoeur terms an abuse of memory, “a

concerted manipulation of memory and of forgetting by those who hold power,” owing to “not enough memory, hence an abuse of forgetting” by elite-level forces.¹⁸⁰

In Chicago, the initial public and political responses to the disaster event were swift and furious. Immediately, blame was placed on Iroquois management and on the non-enforcement of civic fire safety codes. A January 2nd article in the *Tribune* laid out every law they could identify as having been broken, and how those broken laws directly contributed to the slaughter. “Had the building laws of Chicago been strictly complied with in the Iroquois theater the loss of life should have been comparatively small, if there had been any loss at all,” reads the article.¹⁸¹

An examination of the burned building made yesterday showed numerous violations of the laws...

Among the sections to which no attention was paid were those providing:

That a theater must have direct fire alarm connection with fire headquarters.

That all lights must be protected so adjacent material cannot touch them.

That suitable fire extinguishing apparatus be on the stage.

That all exits shall be suitably marked with large signs.

That all galleries shall have independent entrances and exits.

That the number of auditors in a theater shall be limited by the size and number of its exits.

That no auditorium seating over 1000 persons shall be connected with any building not entirely fireproof.

That automatic sprinklers shall be used over all stages.

That a suitable flue be in the roofs of all stages to carry out smoke and fire.

That the apparatus and fittings of all stages and rigging lofts be fireproof.

That all theta errs must face on three open streets.¹⁸²

“If theater managers,” opined another *Tribune* article,

Miserably parsimonious, will not pay for the services of the firemen, the city must stand the expense and charge it to the life saving account...the only atonement that can be made to these hapless victims of negligence is to make the theaters of Chicago absolutely safe...The city must deal with the theaters now as it should have dealt with them long ago. Had it been more mindful of its duty in the past there would have been no mourners today. The community which refuses to enforce measures for the protection of life must admit itself guilty when life is lost because of that refusal.¹⁸³

This civic anger extended from the top of the Theatrical Syndicate — Klaw and Erlanger and Davis and Powers — all the way down to the stage crew and performers. In an attempt to

extricate themselves from possible guilt, Davis and Powers — the aforementioned “miserably parsimonious” theatre managers — shot back at their critics in a December 31st statement:

So far as we have been able to ascertain the cause or causes of the most unfortunate accident of the fire in the Iroquois, it appears the one of the scenic draperies was noticed to have ignited from some cause. It was detected before it has reached an appreciable flame, and the city fireman who is detailed and constantly on duty when the theater is open noticed it simultaneously with the electrician.

The fireman, who was only a few feet away, immediately pulled a tube of Kilfyre, of which there were many hung about the stage, and threw the contents upon the blaze, which would have been more than enough, if the Kilfyre had been effective, to have extinguished the flame at once; but for some cause inherent in the tube of Kilfyre it had no effect. The fireman and electrician then ordered down the asbestos curtain, and the fireman threw the contents of another tube of Kilfyre upon the flame, with no better result.

The commotion thus caused excited the alarm of the audience, which immediately started for the exits, of which there are twenty-five of unusual width, all opening out, and ready to the hand of any one reaching them. The draft thus caused, it is believed, before the curtain could be entirely lowered, produced a bellying of the asbestos curtain, causing a pressure on the guides against the solid brick wall of the proscenium, thus stopping its descent.

Every effort was made by those on the stage to pull it down, but the draft was so great, it seems, that the pressure against the proscenium wall and the friction caused thereby was so strong that they could not be overcome. The audience became panic-stricken in their efforts to reach the exits and tripped and fell over each other and blocked the way.

The audience was promptly admonished and importuned by persons employed on the stage and in the auditorium to be calm and avoid any rush; that the exits and facilities for emptying the theater were ample to enable them all to get out without confusion.

No expense or precaution was omitted to make the theater and fireproof as it could be made, there being nothing combustible in the construction of the house except the trimmings and furnishings of the stage and auditorium. In the building of the theater was sacrificed more space to aisles and exits than any theater in America.¹⁸⁴

Davis and Powers attempt to blame the victims in this case: the city fireman and electrician, Iroquois employees both, struggled to extinguish the fire; the dry chemical extinguisher was marked as bearing guilt owing to “some cause inherent in the tube of Kilfyre”; the audience was “admonished” to be calm and avoid rush, but it was in their rush to exit, and the opening of the numerous exit doors, that the audience caused the draft of fresh air to ignite the smoldering backstage area. These narrative tropes are examples of the kind of elite-level

narrative processing of disasters that demonstrates how corporate and governmental institutions attempted to control memories of the event, in spite of the evidence that was already accumulating against their narratives.

While Davis and Powers tried to mitigate public outrage in Chicago, Klaw and Erlanger faced similar sentiment in New York, and similarly tried to distance themselves from ownership and management of the theatre and the *Blue Beard* production, in spite of the continual pressure numerous news reports noted in the summer preceding the Iroquois' opening. A January 5th editorial by Klaw and Erlanger, published in the *New York Times*, reads,

A paper in the city is willfully and maliciously endeavoring to create the impression in the public mind that this firm is the responsible owner of the Iroquois Theatre, Chicago. The facts, which are easy of access to any one, are that Marc Klaw and A.L. Erlanger each own 12 1/2 per cent of the stock of this theatre, and never owned any more.

We have every faith in the integrity and competency of Messrs. Will J. Davis and Harry J. Powers, who are also stockholders, and the resident managers of that house, and we believe that when calmer counsels prevail and the proper investigation is completed, it will be found that nothing was left undone that could have been foreseen to safeguard the public from that lamentable disaster.¹⁸⁵

The *Tribune* pointed towards the institutional failure of the government to ensure the building was constructed according to code, as well as the “miserably parsimonious” nature of theatre managers; Davis and Powers placed blame on the audience, suggesting that, had they not panicked, they would have been able to escape quickly and safely; Klaw and Erlanger put the blame on Davis and Powers, saying that, as stockholders and resident managers, it was on them to safeguard the public. Reading these series of responses illustrates the reality disruption created by the disaster, and the urgency various parties felt to disentangle themselves from the assignation of guilt in the case of the Iroquois conflagration, creating and framing the disaster through the tropes of dispute and contestation.

The Danger Point in a Theatre

Earlier, I quoted a *Tribune* article that described the thorough cleaning job undertaken by the combined forces of the Fire and Police Departments. The *Tribune* had written that “the awful scenes of the Iroquois Theatre had been wiped away, except in the memory of those who beheld them.”¹⁸⁶ The immediate response was to return the space to something approaching normalcy: in the rush of the post-disaster paradigm, the first instinct was to “fix” the space by re-establishing its correct order. However, this greatly complicated the duty of the Coroner’s jury, as no notes had been taken about what bodies were discovered where, nor in what condition as they were removed. The jury could only comment upon the physical condition of the building, and of what remained — or what was absented from — inside.

As the jury began to hear testimony, working to see if anybody could be held responsible under the law, it was clear that, despite popular public sentiment, it would prove extremely difficult to establish guilt. It is through this ongoing legal contestation that I argue elite-level processing of the disaster “create[d] some space for society to ‘forget’” and, in that created space, came to operate control upon the memory-work of the Iroquois.¹⁸⁷

What the jury had was loads of circumstantial evidence and the emotional support of a bereaved city; what they had was numerous structural problems that contributed in approximate ways to audience members’ deaths. These problems stood at cross-purposes to each other. The *Tribune* noted,

...If it can be proved that any one of the several contributing causes of the disaster is in itself responsible for all the death, and can further be determined who is criminally responsible for the one cause, then the question of indictment is simple. If the closing of the skylights and ventilators on the stage roof was responsible for all the deaths, then the man who is responsible for the closed lights might be held. But that would let out the persons responsible for the locked exit. The moral responsibility for the disaster might be easily fixed, and the fixing of the civil responsibility might also be easy, but the grand jury will not have an easy task.¹⁸⁸

Too much went too wrong at the Iroquois to pin blame on any one individual, and though public sentiment was clearly and powerfully geared towards an indictment of the highest levels of governmental officials and of the theatre's management, the disaster at the Iroquois had as much to do with those elite-level forces as it did with the tendency of responsibility to filter down the chain of command to the lowest level employees of the building. As witnesses began to testify, it became clear that the court would play host to a long form legal struggle, marked by conflict and dispute. The *Tribune* reported,

Yesterday's inquiry developed a conflict between the employees of Klaw & Erlanger, who owned 'Mr. Bluebeard,' and those of the theater. Each appeared to be trying to show that the others were responsible. The contest was brought out forcibly in the testimony of Max Mazzonavich, stage carpenter for the show company, whose statements contradicted the testimony of William McMullen, the light operator, who testified that it was the fault of Electrician Dunn of the show company that the flood light was placed so close to the drapery as to ignite it.¹⁸⁹

This struggle played out particularly between the management, and the housing and fire departments, and the main arguments came down to interpretations of the letter of the law, and between trying to establish what party was telling the truth in moments when testimonies contradicted each other. Powers claimed he was "passive in the conduct of [the Iroquois's] affairs," and that responsibility should be borne by Davis and the employees of the theatre "who, he said, did not perform their full duty."¹⁹⁰ "Davis," Powers told the jury, "told me about engaging Mr. Sallers on Champion's recommendation. I said nothing to Sallers as to what should be provided for fire protection, nor did I do anything else toward procuring or seeing about fire protection appliances. I understood that those orders were given by Mr. Davis."¹⁹¹

Chief Musham testified that it was not his, nor his department's responsibility, to enforce fire safety ordinance. "His duty," the *Tribune* reports about his testimony, "lay only in the inspection of apparatus after it had been installed...were no apparatus installed, as was the case

at the Iroquois, it was no concern of his.”¹⁹² “The ordinance requires,” he repeated a dozen times, “that I inspect the apparatus after it is installed.”¹⁹³ Davis, meanwhile, laid the blame at the feet of his employees like Head Usher George Dusenberry, testifying, “I trusted everything to my employees and supposed that the theater was fully equipped and the safest in the world.” These employees turned around and pointed the finger right back at Davis.¹⁹⁴ It came out in court that the Iroquois had been the site of a fire only weeks before the deadly conflagration, in an eerie mirror to the fires that preceded both Richmond and Brooklyn, when Joseph Dougherty, the man in charge of the curtain, contended that,

Two weeks before the big fire there was a blaze. It was slight and was put out at once, but it was sufficient to cause an alarm and a call for the asbestos curtain. The curtain started down, but it caught after coming about fifteen to twenty feet above the stage, the same as it did the day of the big fire. It fell the same distance on both occasions.¹⁹⁵

One of the most damning pieces of evidence concerned a set of iron gates installed outside of the doors on the second and third floors. Fire Department Attorney Monroe Fulkerson spoke pointedly to the jury about the iron gates: they were “in a battered condition” when he had inspected them the next morning, suggesting that victims had died trying to beat the gates down. Most damningly, Fulkerson’s investigation turned up that the management installed the gates privately after the building commission had already accepted designs for the building:

With reference to those iron gates...they are no part of the building or the stairway as turned over by the builders and were not a part of the plans of the same, but a feature installed by the management after the stairways were finished and accepted, and no permit was obtained from the city building department to place the gates there. They proved to be the gates of death. Until this time they had been overlooked in the general investigations and silence has been maintained by the fire department of the purpose of clinching the evidence concerning them this was rendered necessary through the fact that those best qualified to tell of their danger gave up their lives in acquiring that knowledge. They were gathered from behind the deadly barriers and now lie in eternal silence beyond the reach of all earthly summonses and the jurisdiction of our tribunals.¹⁹⁶

Even Benjamin Marshall admitted to having changed the designs of the building. “The plans were changed in some matter without consulting the building department,” he testified, although made the point that the changes were made for safety reasons.¹⁹⁷ Fulkerson grilled Dusenberry about metal gates found in the hallways on the second and third floors. Fulkerson, jowly and wide-set, got Dusenberry to admit to the lack of training of Iroquois employees in court; Dusenberry said he “had never received any instruction for any of the owners or managers of the theater as to what to do in case of a fire,” and that Davis had told him “to instruct the boys in their duties and ushers and make them familiar with the house.”¹⁹⁸ The “boys,” in turn, roasted Dusenberry’s management; Willard Sayles, one such usher, reported that “during my period of employment the fire escape exits at the alley side of the house were always kept locked,” and that “the only time we got instructions was the Sunday before the house opened; Mr. Dusenberry called us all down there and told us to get familiar with the house.”¹⁹⁹

Traeger’s initial inquest ended on the 26th of January, and he expected that they would debate all night before passing a verdict the next day. The jury had read, by the estimate of the *New York Tribune*, almost 750,000 piece of evidence, and had heard testimony from almost four hundred individuals. When they came back immediately with a verdict, assigning guilt to a number of elite-level governmental actors, Traeger admitted to being surprised. The jury’s verdict listed out the reasons for the fire, argued who they believed should take responsibility for the disaster, and finally argued that there was enough compelling evidence to send the case on to a grand jury for criminal prosecution.²⁰⁰

In particular, the jury found cause to bring six individuals associated with the theatre and the government of the city of Chicago to trail. When it came to assigning blame, the jury held Will J. Davis,

As president and general manager, principally responsible for the foregoing violations in the failure to see that the Iroquois theater was properly equipped as required by city ordinances, and that his employes [sic] were not sufficiently instructed and drilled for any and all emergencies...²⁰¹

Carter Harrison was held responsible because,

He has shown a lamentable lack of force in his efforts to shirk responsibility...heads of departments under the said Carter H. Harrison following this weak course have given Chicago inefficient service, which makes such calamities as the Iroquois theater horror a menace until the public service is purged of incompetents²⁰²

George Williams, Building Commissioner of Chicago, was held responsible “for gross neglect of his duty in allowing the Iroquois Theater to open its doors to the public when the said theater was incomplete, and did not comply with the requirements of the building ordinances of the city of Chicago,” while Building Inspector Edward Loughlin was held “responsible for gross neglect of duty and glaring incompetency in reporting the Iroquois theatre ‘O.K.’ on a most superficial inspection.” Chief Musham was found responsible “for gross neglect of duty in not enforcing the city ordinances as they relate to his department, and failure to have his subordinate, William Sallers, fireman at the Iroquois Theater, report the lack of fire apparatus and appliances as required by law.” Sallers, meanwhile, was found responsible “for gross neglect of duty in not reporting the lack of proper fire apparatus and appliances,” while William McMullen, the operator of the light, was found responsible “for gross neglect and carelessness in performance of duty,” and James Cummings, the stage carpenter, was held responsible “for gross carelessness and neglect of duty in not equipping the stage with proper fire apparatus and appliances.”²⁰³ The jury further demanded immediate civic change, calling for stricter regulation of existing ordinances and better training and proliferation of firefighters and police officers in theatre houses.²⁰⁴

“The stage,” wrote the *Tribune*, “always is recognized as the danger point in a theater, and the desire is to have it cut off from the auditorium as thoroughly as possible.”²⁰⁵ The stage may, indeed, always represent the danger point in a theatre, but in the case of the Iroquois, the poor design, bad management, and incompetent civic oversight of the building profoundly heightened the intrinsic danger of the stage. As Traeger and his jury worked to affix blame of some kind, competing narratives of the event were contested and played out in court; each witness attempted to pin blame onto someone else. These legal struggles, concomitant with the lack of shared performances of grief, greatly challenged the development and spread of grass-roots memory work. Establishing this challenge is significant because, in attempting to assign legal blame for the fire, Traeger’s job required him to construct a consistent, sociologically accepted, official narrative of the disaster, and to use that narrative to assign guilt for the fire. In doing this, Traeger effectively, though perhaps inadvertently, silenced grass-roots memory work, and contributed to the construction of memory of the Iroquois as deeply rooted in opposition and dispute.

No Color of Excuse

This section tracks the long and protracted legal battles that surrounded the Iroquois Theatre disaster following the Coroner’s jury’s verdict, with focus on the governmental agents identified therein, and on Will J. Davis. In this section, I advance the argument that these legal battles served to distract public sentiment from the horror of the disaster through a series of legal performances that played out in the court room and on the front page. The individual government and theatre officials were cast in roles as representative of the failure of the government as a whole. In failing attempts to find any of these individuals guilty on charges of negligence, malfeasance, and/or corruption, the government, and Will Davis, found themselves similarly free

of guilt. In this freedom of guilt, the elite-level processes of memory-work were empowered to wrest control of the narrative of the disaster from any grass-roots efforts undertaken by victim communities.

The city as a public institution was fundamentally acquitted of any guilt when, in July 1904, Judge Holdom handed down a decision “which is of general interest as fixing the legal responsibility of a city for personal injury or loss of life in fires like the Iroquois Theater holocaust,” as brought by Eva Catherine Gibson.²⁰⁶ Gibson claimed “the theatre was a public nuisance and the municipality was liable because of the dereliction of its officers in issuing a license before the theater had complied with the ordinance.”²⁰⁷ Holdom’s opinion was that the city was not guilty on those grounds; “and further that the city would not be liable even if the theater had been a public nuisance in the legal acception of the term.”²⁰⁸ This opinion meant that, in private or semipublic spaces, where the individual enters of their own free will, “the city’s interest in and control over private enterprises are too limited to render the city liable for any personal injury which may come through such enterprises.”²⁰⁹ This had the effect of functionally dismissing almost one hundred other similar cases.

One of the targets of the harshest criticism was Chicago Mayor Carter Harrison, especially when considered in the context of the report delivered to the Mayor’s office only a few months prior by Building Superintendent George Williams, as explained in the Epilogue to Part II. Harrison, Jr. was Chicago’s first city-born Mayor, son to the wildly popular Mayor Carter Harrison, Sr. A stout, portly man, Harrison’s mustache and hair were silver-peppered, and though he may have looked like Chicago’s grandfather, Harrison’s tenure as Mayor was marked by his tolerance of vice, as well as issues of graft in local city politics. When the jury convened to establish guilt in the case of the Iroquois fire, Harrison was one of their primary targets. The

jury had an opportunity not only to place blame, but also to expose corruption at the highest levels of Chicago's government. They hoped to do this by highlighting the April 1903 report that Commissioner Williams had submitted to the Council detailing the lack of safety measures being enforced in theatres around the city. Under Traeger's examination, Harrison admitted in mid-January 1904 that "he had no color of excuse in the ordinance for his action in shifting to the council the responsibility for action on Commissioner Williams' report."²¹⁰ The outlook in the case was fairly damning for the Mayor, and rumors began to float in Chicago's political hallways that he had even demanded the issuance of a permit to the Iroquois despite the unsatisfactory nature of the building, effectively insinuating that the Theatrical Syndicate had paid off Chicago's top official. Williams squashed this rumor himself: "Anybody who says the mayor forced me to sign the permit recommendation has forgotten how to tell the truth."²¹¹

Suddenly, in early February, new evidence emerged which exonerated the Mayor, despite his earlier admission that he had "no color of excuse." Four employees of City Hall testified that Harrison had called a conference on Williams' report, which was attended by Williams and themselves: City Clerk Fred Bender, Harrison's assistant Edward Lahiff, City Collector Edward Lahiff, and Deputy Collector J. F. McCarthy. At this meeting, they testified, Harrison had instructed Bender and Lahiff to suspend licenses for theaters that did not abide by the city ordinances. The *Tribune*'s report on the exoneration gave voice to feelings of incredulity about the Mayor's aides suddenly remembering new information that benefitted Harrison. Harrison, the paper reported,

Owes his escape in a great measure...to the testimony of four of his subordinates, who gave evidence before the grand jury that was not developed at the coroner's inquest...even the mayor's own testimony before the coroner did not show that he had taken any action in regard to ascertaining the condition of the Iroquois before the theater was granted a license to open.²¹²

Sallers, meanwhile, was served by the Grand Jury a “no bill” in his trial in mid-February. The *Tribune* speculated that this return was evidence that “the jurors have already decided that the duty of inspecting the theater lay with the building commissioner and not the fire department”; this return also pointed to the fact that Chief Musham would, in the coming days, see a similar result.²¹³

Neither Williams nor Laughlin were ever prosecuted. The final mentions of the trial of George Williams, the Building Commissioner — and by April 1907, the lone governmental representative with charges stemming from the Iroquois fire remaining against him — appears in the *Tribune* on April 9th and 10th, 1907. The April 9th article notes “unusual interest attaches to this case from the fact that it is destined to bring either the final curtain in the legal drama or the first real hearing of charges on their merits.”²¹⁴ Along with Williams, Edward Laughlin, the building instructor, was charged with “malfeasance” — sometimes stylized as “misfeasance” — of duty. By 1907, Laughlin had “died last year before preliminary hearings of the Davis indictment,” leaving only Williams to face the brunt of the legal system’s fury.²¹⁵

Though he was the last remaining government representative, “the maximum punishment that can be meted out to Williams,” notes the *Tribune*, “is a fine of \$1000. For this and other reasons, it would not surprise those who have followed the litigation if the state did not press the case,” because it would not be worth it for them to do so.²¹⁶ The *Tribune* seemed aware of the almost farcical nature of the series of trials, and noted that, because the state had been unable to get charges to stick to Davis, “it is futile to attempt further to fix the responsibility for the fire and its results. The case against Williams has always been considered of minor importance... a possible conviction would be of less corrective value than if the qualification of an existing official were in question.”²¹⁷ An article published the next day announced that Williams’s trial

“was continued [until April 25th] by Judge Kavanagh...through the inability of Attorney Moritz Rosenthal...to appear.”²¹⁸ This seems to have been the final mention of Williams’s trial, and though James J. Barbour, the State’s Attorney vowed to “push the case to a finish,” it seems evident that the court dismissed the charges sometime in the following two weeks.

Most effort was spent on attempts to convict Will Davis. Davis floated in something of a legal limbo for three years as a series of court decisions circuitously affirmed and denied his culpability in the Iroquois case. Necessarily colored by contention and dispute, the legal proceedings around Will J. Davis also invoke numerous rhetorical devices of metatheatricity, especially with regards to his lawyer, Levy Mayer. Mayer’s brilliant legal mind, and his use of the tools of theatre to successfully gain purchase on defining the Iroquois blaze, completed the post-disaster paradigmatic construction of memory work about the Iroquois as dominated by elite-level government processing.

Levy Mayer started representing Davis in September 1904. Mayer, a preternaturally brilliant legal mind who had graduated from Yale’s School of Law at eighteen years old, was the driving force behind Davis’s eventual exoneration. By September 1904, Mayer, just weeks shy of his 46th birthday, had already cemented his status as a powerful and fearful lawyer with specific interests defending large corporations against anti-trust litigation. Mayer’s involvement in the Iroquois case came as a surprise to the state’s attorneys; on the same day he announced, in court, his representation of Davis, he also petitioned the court for a change of venue to ensure a “fair and impartial hearing,” citing widespread public antipathy towards Davis. The State’s Attorney’s office “had had no intimation that Mr. Mayer had been retained in the case.”²¹⁹ In calling for a change of venue, Mayer demonstrated recognition of the powerful relationship between space, memory, and disaster, and the tendency for disaster to effectively mark time and

space through memory-work. By September of 1904, the city of Chicago would have been moving quickly towards the first anniversary of the fire, and Mayer recognized the sociological influence anniversaries carry for citizens to re-mark the disaster event as socially significant, a point taken up in the following chapter.

Mayer understood the power and efficacy of theatricality, and to back up his claim of prejudice against Davis, his timing was specific and instrumental to his argument: in addition to the upcoming anniversary of the fire, the Iroquois Theatre had just been re-opened to the public under the operation of Hyde and Behman, and Mayer argued the reopening of the building had caused “‘inflammatory articles’ to appear in the newspaper.”²²⁰ To back up his claim, Mayer sought to have “five volumes and 2,800” copies of such newspaper articles entered into evidence, and “150 affidavits,” although Mayer claimed he could easily procure up to “150,000” affidavits for the purpose of moving the trial.²²¹

Barnes took the bait, and issued Mayer a challenge: “be sworn, Mr. Mayer, and tell me under oath how long ago it was that you first began to present this petition for a change of venue.”²²² Mayer “sprang to his feet. ‘I accept your challenge,’” he declared,

The...affidavits recited in detail the history of the fire and the growth of the alleged prejudice on the part of the community. It was stated that this feeling of prejudice had been fostered by the newspapers and by the Iroquois Memorial association and other organizations, even of school children...The affidavits then set forth that this prejudice apparently had died out at the time of the indictment on Feb. 2 and until Sept. 19, but that on the latter date the Iroquois theater was again opened for amusements, whereupon the public protest and against the operating of the theater recalled the horrors of the fire and aroused the passion and revived the prejudice of the inhabitant of Cook county.²²³

The brilliance of Mayer’s legal maneuvering is that it played upon and used the tensions of memory, performance and public outrage. Mayer specifically attacked the memory-work being undertaken by the Iroquois Memorial Association, explored in greater detail in the following chapter, and advanced that charge all the way down to school children; all were participating in

creating an unfair, impartial environment for his client. By arguing these claims — whether true or not — Mayer simultaneously evoked the memory of the hundreds of young lives lost in the fire for everyone present in the court room, while also pointing out that the narrative of the Iroquois had, more or less, passed from history into a state of shared memory. If it had not been impossible before his performative utterance to hold a “fair and impartial trial” for Davis, it certainly was now. Barnes was essentially tricked by a superior legal mind into giving Mayer precisely what he wanted: a stage upon which to recall the tragedy, to re-awaken the feelings of public anger, to politicize these memories, and to ensure Davis’ trial would be moved.

In June of 1905, Mayer presented the court with a series of riddles — “when is a theater owner not a theater owner?...When is an ordinance not an ordinance?”²²⁴ — and argued that, whether the theater would have been safer had it been properly equipped with fire safety apparatus was “theoretical.”²²⁵ More importantly, Mayer argued,

The statute doesn’t specify whose the responsibility is, or whose the duty is. It is one of the omissions that occur commonly in legislation. I would suggest that in the matter of permanent precautions against fire the duty fall to the owner of a theater; but that the responsibility for installing movable apparatus fall upon the shoulders of the manager.

If Mr. Davis had undertaken to discharge the duties of a manager, he would have become a manager. But even if he promised to do what the law could not compel him to perform, he cannot be held criminally responsibly. Unless he is charged exclusively with a certain office, the failure to fulfill which results fatally, he is not indictable.²²⁶

The next year, in June 1906, Mayer continued his metatheatrical streak, continuing to fight for a change of venue for Davis, when he revisited his affidavit performance from September 1904. Mayer,

And his assistant, Alfred S. Austrian, appeared in the courtroom and at the head of a small army of clerks and messenger boys bearing “the documents in the case.” These consisted of twenty-seven volumes of bound affidavits of the 12,045 persons who swore they did not believe Davis could be given a fair trial in this county, a dozen volumes of newspaper accounts of the Iroquois fire, and subsequent proceedings and miscellaneous legal tomes.²²⁷

The message of the performance was clear: if it took an “army” of persons delivering documents about the impossibility of Davis’s guaranteed right to a fair and impartial trial, the evidence was so overwhelming as to assure a change of venue. The trial was eventually moved to Danville, IL, and interest in the case was, indeed, reawakened. This is illustrated in a February 19th, 1907 article in the *Tribune*, following Davis’s plea of “not guilty,” which claimed, “eager interest in the approaching trial was manifest around town. Bets of 2 to 1 in favor of acquittal were made freely in the courthouse square.”²²⁸

Davis’s trial began in early March of 1907 in Danville, and if it felt like he would no longer be able to squirm out of the firm grip of justice, Mayer betrayed no hint of it, attacking the charges against his client with ferocity and, in the first days of the trial, succeeded in ensuring Davis’s release on what can only be called an issue of semantics; the *Tribune* called it “a trump card.”²²⁹ Mayer waited until the jury had been selected, and the first witness — Maud Jackson, the mother of Viva Jackson, a young victim of the fire, whose death had been selected by the State Attorney to build their case around — had been called to present his argument: the building ordinances under which Davis was being charged void and meaningless. “The ordinances are void,” he argued,

Because of the uncertainty in requiring that certain appliances shall be present in all halls or other places for the purpose of accommodating large numbers of people, and that the term “large numbers” of people is so indefinite as to render the ordinances void.

That the statutes of the state of Illinois, under which the city of Chicago derives power to establish fire limits, merely give the city power to prohibit the erection of wooden buildings within such limits. There is no power lodged in the city to do anything else in the way of regulating buildings within the fire limits.²³⁰

Mayer’s canny legal argument illustrates how the themes of dispute and contestation were powerfully influential even years after the disaster event, disputing the very legitimacy of the city to enforce its own code. Davis, Mayer argued, could not be charged because he hadn’t

broken any laws, because Chicago *had no power to enforce building codes*. The ordinances specifically stated that the only power of fire safety granted to the city was the ability to “prohibit the erection of wooden buildings” within its limits. “This indictment is based on a law which might go in China, but which has no place in this land of constitutional liberty and privilege,” Mayer argued. “This defendant is happy here in an atmosphere where neither vengeance nor spite has justice by the nose.”²³¹

Mayer continued, giving a brief rundown of the complicated legal history that had led them to this place; a girl in the audience was heard to remark that Mayer was “horribly polite,” suggesting a calm, reasoned performance of his argument.²³² Mayer argued,

This building ordinance in no way declares whose duty it is to put in flues and sprinkler systems. Would you put these things on the owner, or say every tenant must attend to the flues, fire escapes, etc.? Yet this ordinance does not say whose duty it shall be. Your judicial conscience would be compelled to declare such an ordinance void even if some other concurrent judge upheld it. Your honor will not hide behind the battery of some associate judge. There are two questions which in the opinion of all the counsel for the defense are vital and make the existence of the ordinance in the case impossible. I think the court concedes the ownership question. Mr. Davis was no more owner of the theater than Samuel Felton was owner of the Chicago and Alton railroad because he happens to be its president.²³³

It was, Mayer contended, “the hand of God that brought about the loss of 596 lives in the Iroquois theater fire,” and that, “Will J. Davis was no more responsible for their deaths than if a hurricane had lifted off the roof of the theater.”²³⁴ In this argument, Mayer unwittingly issued a dispute to some of the religious constructions of the disaster event as inherently godless. Mayer even successfully invoked the death of young Viva Jackson in his defense of the Iroquois, effectively ruining any emotional impact her mother’s testimony may have provided. “Suppose,” he argued,

I opened a theatre on the south side of Seventy-fifth Street. There was no flue or vent, no expert fireman, no program. Viva Jackson attends. There is a horrible holocaust. Six hundred lives are lost. I am not guilty. I have violated no ordinance. On the north side of

the street I would be guilty of manslaughter. The fact is, there had been a great municipal blunder. The city has no power to differentiate.²³⁵

It took two days to exonerate Davis of guilt. Ultimately, it was a technicality of the Chicago building code that gave Davis his freedom. Judge Kimbrough released Davis; although he noted, “that Davis might be morally guilty,” he allowed, “Davis was not legally guilty.”²³⁶ Mayer was able to successfully convince the court that the disaster was akin to a natural disaster, resisting the narratives of greed and negligence constructed by Chicago’s clergy and victim communities immediately following the fire. Davis continued to manage theatres in Chicago until his death in 1919. Ultimately, the efficacy of Mayer’s arguments exists at the intersections of semantic and rhetorical legal dispute, contestation, and deconstruction, a brilliant and creative legal mind, and an appreciation for the power of performance. Perhaps it was this appreciation for performance that led Mayer to become involved with the Theatrical Syndicate, a relationship addressed in the next chapter.

While I’ve focused here almost exclusively on the criminal liability, it is worth mentioning the civil cases that were brought against the various parties relevant to the Iroquois Theatre. A major complication of these cases is addressed by the *Illinois Law Review*, noting the involved parties’ tendencies to request demurrers, dismissal of the charges on legal grounds as opposed to factual grounds. These requests were mostly successful, and by 1907, “only a small proportion of the cases that were commenced [are] still pending.” About sixty of the 175 charged against the George Fuller Company were among the cases that remained, and none of those cases were appearing on any of the court’s docket calendars.²³⁷ “It may ultimately be held that the Fuller Company is liable,” argue Frederic Woodward and Frank Smith, “but the lawyer whose compensation is contingent upon success, as is probably true in nearly all of these cases, is likely

to conclude, unless he has a sufficient number of cases to repay him for a long and bitter struggle, that the game is ‘not worth the candle.’”²³⁸

I doubt the colloquial invocation of the flame was accidental. The Fuller Company was, indeed, eventually found liable in 1908, and the company settled out of court with the survivors.²³⁹ Thirty-nine claimants settled for a grand total of \$29750 — \$750 each, or, approximately fifty dollars for each victim who died in the theatre on December 30th, 1903. It would be difficult to prove that the long and protracted legal and civil processes of assigning guilt were purposefully elongated and protracted by the legal representation of the Iroquois Company, because it can take a long time for justice to be served. In the case of the Iroquois, however, it seems that justice never was served, and that was due primarily to a technicality embedded within the letter of law. This lack of justice had a profound impact on grass-roots memory work by playing upon the essential contestation of post-disaster paradigmatic reconstructions of systems of order.

After disasters, societies band together in order to re-assert order in a disrupted, dis-ordered world, and ritual processes, including funeral services, and the burial of the dead, play vital roles in this re-assertion of order. One facet of those ritual processes must be the legal proceedings that seek to give answer to citizens searching for a meaningful, “official” narrative in a disastrous occurrence. All of these ritual processes tend to empower the ability of a society of actors to “let go” of the disaster and “move on” from it. That the legal proceedings around the Iroquois took so long suggests that the wound of the Iroquois never quite healed correctly, and it remained, if not a fresh burn on the skin of the city, a maddeningly itchy scar of deadened nerve endings. The memory of the Iroquois was not fresh and vital by 1907. What had seemed a clear cut case of moral and civic guilt at the beginning of 1904 devolved into a series of rhetorical legal squabbles

that resulted in “more and more information” about the disaster becoming public, and greater pressure being placed upon elite-level processing of the disaster by victim communities, making it “harder instead of easier to arrive at some form of joint remembrance and consensual history writing.”²⁴⁰ Whereas in Richmond and Brooklyn, where there were levels of cooperation between elite-level forces and grass-roots communities, this kind of productive relationship was absent in the post-disaster paradigm of Chicago replaced instead by dispute, contestation, and opposition.

Part III, Chapter 12: Sacred to the Memory

A Vaudeville House in the Graveyard

On a mild January morning in 2013, 109 years after the Iroquois Theatre burned to the ground, my friend Jane and I walked through Montrose Cemetery, well north of downtown Chicago, where some of the 602 people who perished in the fire are laid to rest. In the cemetery stands an imposing diamond shaped memorial, gray, ten feet tall, weathered by age and exposure to nature, with words carved into its face: “Sacred to the Memory of 600 people who perished in the Iroquois Theatre Fire Dec. 30, 1903. Erected by the Iroquois Memorial Association.” As we studied the marker, Jane, a Chicago transplant and a font of knowledge about Chicago ephemera, asked me “so, wait. I don’t know the story. What exactly happened?”

It is easy to see, from a temporal distance, that the city and the social systems of order operating in Chicago, as well as the managerial shortcomings of Davis and Power, contributed, if not in proximate ways, then in approximate ways, to the disaster at the Iroquois. In the previous chapter, I detailed the long and winding road from the Iroquois disaster toward re-establishing a form of social order through attempts to assign blame via legal processes, an analysis of the historical evidence undertaken to argue that it was through the protracted and complicated legal process that the Iroquois passed from the public memory into the realm of forgetting, an illustration of elite-level memory work to control and define the social experience of a disaster process. This chapter explores the numerous difficulties encountered by the Iroquois Memorial Association to perform grass-roots memory-work to provide for a memorial to the victims of the disaster, in order to illustrate how contestation between elite-level institutions and grass-roots communities creates space for forgetting.

One of the problems faced by the city of Chicago after the fire was what to do with the remainders of the building. While the damage to the performance and audience space was catastrophic, the building itself — the lobby and exterior in particular — remained in pretty good shape. In his seminal article *Between History and Memory*, Pierre Nora wrote about “the acceleration of history...an increasingly rapid slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good, a general perception that anything and everything may disappear.”²⁴¹ “There are,” Nora argues, “*lieux de memoire*, sites of memory” — monuments and memorials — “because there are no longer *milieux de memoire*, real environments of memory.”²⁴² Read through Nora’s framework, the cities of Richmond and Brooklyn grieved their losses in productive, socially shared ways, and the buildings, being near or total losses, allowed the space of the disaster to be “written over.” In Richmond, this writing over was done through a specifically Christian operation, tied to the religiously-dominated narrative following the fire. The site became both a literal grave and a church standing in memory of those who were lost. In Brooklyn, the site of the theatre was turned over to Haverly’s Theatre in 1879, but before that, the building was a complete loss, transformed into a hell mouth, no longer signifying as a theatre. In other words, the absence of the buildings contributed to allowing the citizens of those cities to move on. In Chicago, the building continued to stand as a chilling reminder of the violence of December 30th, 1903, and became a site marked by the bitter struggles of a variety of parties trying to wrest control of the memory work in the post-disaster paradigm. This section focuses on the physical building of the Iroquois Theatre, and how it became a contentious nexus for various social performances of the tensions between remembering and forgetting.

This tension is perhaps nowhere better identified than in Arthur Hornblow's 1904 article in *Theatre* magazine, which accurately predicts, based on readings of theatre fires past, what would occur in the months and years following the Iroquois blaze:

It is the usual experience that disasters of this kind are followed by great public excitement, the newspapers demand reform, the theaters suffer from lack of patronage, the authorities display great activity and the managers show themselves eager to remedy defects. But the show of zeal never lasts. The disaster is forgotten in a week, the theaters do as little as they can, gradually neglecting the most ordinary precautions, the public does not give the matter a thought, and everything goes on merrily as before unless a fresh horror occurs to teach us another lesson.²⁴³

"This time," Hornblow begs, "let us not forget."²⁴⁴

The earliest call for a memorial to the fire came on January 6th, 1904, from the *Washington Post*:

Use of the Iroquois Theater site as a memorial through the erection of a suitable church or memorial building to replace the present seared, scarred structure was suggested to-day. The idea is to emulate the people of Vienna, who, in memory of the 800 lives lost in the Ring-strasse Theater in 1881, have erected a magnificent church on its site.²⁴⁵

That the *Washington Post*'s call to build in the stead of the "seared, scarred structure" a church ignores the people of Richmond, VA in the early 1800's, who similarly "erected a magnificent church" on the site of a ruined theatre illustrates the tendency of theatre fires in the United States of America to slip into the "irretrievable past." In Chicago, survivors and victims' family members formed the Iroquois Memorial Association, the first reference to which appeared in a January 14th, 1904 article in the *Tribune*. The article reads,

The aims of the organization are set forth in the report of the executive committee, which was adopted:

First — to establish a suitable memorial to perpetuate the memory of those who lost their lives in the Iroquois theater fire on Dec. 30, 1903.

Second — to extend aid to those made destitute through the loss of relatives.

Third — to devise and carry out methods of preventing similar occurrences in the future.

Fourth — to assist in and compel the enforcement of existing and any future ordinances and statues [sic] enacted for the purpose of safeguarding human life in public assemblages.’²⁴⁶

The IMA was specifically imagined and constructed as a survivor community for advancement towards establishing a memorial, and towards developing an assurance that such a tragedy would never happen again. “I do not think we are here for revenge,” said Henry M. Shabad, who lost two children in the fire, “we could not ask the state of Illinois to grant us a charter for an organization whose main object would be revenge...we want justice, it is true, and we are going to have it, but let our deliberations be tempered with judgment and not warped with passion.”²⁴⁷ The IMA was officially incorporated on the 23rd of January, when “more than 200 relatives of victims of the Iroquois theater fire attended the meeting,” of the IMA. They adopted a constitution and an executive board. The first and most pressing matter for the IMA group was moving forward toward the erection of a suitable memorial:

We feel it is our duty to take the initiative in this matter, and with the help of the public to erect a memorial that will be a worthy tribute to the dead, a useful and instructive institution for the living, and that not only will remind but point out to the authorities the duties to the public in the protection of human life.

It is intended also to provide a fund to care for all those who may have been left, through the loss of relatives, in destitute circumstances.

We propose that this organization shall devote its time and energies towards causing a higher value to be placed on human life by those responsible for its safety.”²⁴⁸

Somewhat strangely, the *Tribune* noted that at the meeting, “a clause” to the constitution adopted at the meeting “prohibits participation in lawsuits resulting for the disaster.”²⁴⁹ I suspect the reason for this inclusion is owed to the statement quoted above: “we propose that this organization shall devote its time and energies towards causing a higher value to be placed on human life by those responsible for its safety.” Perhaps the IMA foresaw the difficult legal struggles that would come to define the memory-work about the Iroquois fire. Perhaps the IMA understood that individual legal cases might have ended in value being assigned at differing

levels to victims' lives. Perhaps the IMA anticipated that legal entanglement would result in the organization being mired in the contentions and disputes that colored memory work in the post-disaster paradigm for years to come, and they preferred to focus on creating productive memory work in an positive environment to help move on from the fire.

Quickly, Arthur E. Hull, one of the executive board members of the IMA, made the announcement that he would offer the sale of the land under the theatre to the IMA, "on which to build a memorial to the victims of the fire."²⁵⁰ The announcement was a surprise. "Mr. Hull," the *Tribune* reported, "refuses to say who authorizes him to make the offer, further than that it is one of the foremost surgeons of the city."²⁵¹ The site was to be given over by "the heirs to the estate of which the site is a part," who "have agreed to convey it, with all leaseholds, to the association," according to Hull.²⁵² This was a bit of political performance on Hull's behalf, perhaps seeking to force the owners — Arthur T. Lyman, A. Lawrence Lowell, and Arthur Lyman — to abide, in the name of good publicity, by his fictional contract. Hull never had any contract, and, in reality, Lyman, Lowell and Lyman would not sell the land under the theatre until 1907, a transaction discussed later in this chapter. Understood as a form of political performance, Hull's declaration demonstrates how deeply the use of theatrical rhetoric to respond to the fire became embedded into the social construction and deployment of narratives of dispute and contention about the event, while simultaneously illustrating an understanding of the importance of controlling the spatial significance of the theatre in order to gain a measure of control of the ability to construct memorial narratives.

The suggestion of a memorial church to take the place of the Iroquois was dismissed quickly, and Richard Teller Crane, a multimillionaire industrialist, founder and vice president of R.T. Crane & Brother, who lost two nieces in the blaze — and who had hired John Ripley

Freeman, noted in the previous chapter, to undertake a study of the particulars of the fire — announced on the 9th of January his plans to begin a fund to finance a memorial hospital, “as a lasting memorial to those who perished in the Iroquois theatre fire...designed particularly for the care of women and children,” and who started donations with a hefty check for \$5,000.²⁵³ Crane suggested that the hospital “might be erected in or near the downtown district,” so that “it might be available in case of similar disasters.”²⁵⁴

In making this suggestion, Crane re-enforced Hull’s identification of the importance of (re)defining the terms of the space of the disaster. A semiotic analysis of the geography of Crane’s plan reveals a desire to highlight and reify the physical violence caused by the event and, in doing so, to never allow the event to slip into the irretrievable past. Crane’s hospital would signify the haunted space’s necessary relationship to the violence of the Iroquois disaster event in much the same way that the Monumental Church signified the religious dimensionality of memory in Richmond. By “writing over” the space of the Iroquois disaster with an emergency hospital, Crane’s plan would link the successful medical treatment of emergency cases, particularly “women and children,” to the abject failure of providing a safe social setting for women and children. Implicitly, Crane’s hospital would perform the kind of doubly-significant role that Anne Eyre notes many memorials perform. Eyre writes, “permanent memorials may focus on the importance of looking forward as well as back to an event.”²⁵⁵ The hospital may also be understood as an example of an environment of memory insofar as it promises to live the values and standards of the community by ensuring that any future emergencies in the downtown area would have immediate access to proper, systematized medical care. The hospital, then, would stand as a spatiotemporal link to the past and the future, a constant reminder of the violence of the Iroquois disaster, and a constant promise of “never again.”

Crane's plan was met with approval by Alderman William M. Butterworth, who furthered the suggestion by calling for "the conversion of the Iroquois theater into the seat of a memorial emergency hospital."²⁵⁶ The idea of a memorial emergency hospital captured the public imagination. A March 20th article claimed "many aid [the funding of a] new hospital" and noted that "progress has been made during the week by the committee having in charge the raising of funds necessary," while an April 6th article wrote of the "energetic work" being undertaken for the funding of a new hospital, and explained that "the organization of children will, it is believed, add to the popularity of the movement."²⁵⁷ However, the business interests of Chicago's theatre owner-operators in the Iroquois began to peak, as well, and the space became marked by a contest between remembering the victims of the Iroquois and moving forward through the production of theatre. The question at the heart of this dispute for Chicago was: how will we construct our future?

Before Levy Mayer had originally insinuated himself within the Iroquois proceedings as the representative of William Harris of the Boston area theatrical firm Rich & Harris in late May 1904. Rich & Harris were considering purchasing the building to launch a vaudeville house, and Harris had toured the remains of the building in late March of the same year. "The arrangement of the theater, its location, and highly ornate foyer pleased" Harris. James J. Reynolds, the President of the IMA, was skeptical of the plan and of Harris:

I found out the kind of people they are last winter when I approached their representative, a Mr. Harris, with a warning that the house would not be supported by the public if he insisted upon running a theatre.

"Don't be too sure of that," he answered. "If I should advertise that fifteen men were going to jump off the Masonic temple this afternoon I would have the biggest crowd you ever saw." That is the sort of curiosity these people are trudging for. If they decided that they will have a crowd they will stay open.²⁵⁸

By mid-April, the building was purchased for use by Hyde & Behman. In many ways, Hyde & Behman's interest in the Iroquois provides an eerie parallel to the interests of the Theatrical Syndicate only a handful of years prior. Hyde & Behman went into business, in 1900, with a collection of other vaudeville theatre owner/operators, including Rich & Harris, under the collective title of the Vaudeville Managers Association. Just as Klaw and Erlanger had sought to turn the Iroquois into the western equivalent of the finest theatres in the world, so, too, did Hyde & Behman seek to turn it into the premiere vaudeville house of the west, and just as the Syndicate had planned to use the Iroquois as the center of its Midwest touring circuit, the VMA saw the potential for a similar use. Harris, a member of the IMA argued, had served as a "representative" for Hyde & Behman, although it seems that there was considerable back-and-forth before the sale was finalized.²⁵⁹ Several weeks later Harris sent Mayer to City Hall with a brand new set of plans for renovating the building.²⁶⁰ Mayer met with Iroquois architect B.H. Marshall and explained the new plans.²⁶¹ It seems likely that this was the first time Mayer took an interest in the Iroquois, but, as I described in the previous chapter, his association with the building, the space, and the disaster would continue for years.²⁶²

The plans Mayer brought dealt with some of the fundamental inadequacies of the original construction, including the modification of "the steep pitch of the gallery," and the installation of "fireproof walls...in the rear of the main floor of the balcony and of the gallery."²⁶³ Hyde & Behman planned to re-open the building as a low-priced "10-20-30" vaudeville theatrical house, and the IMA resisted them throughout the late-spring and summer of 1904.²⁶⁴ Chicago's government took the stance that the theatre would not re-open until all of the modifications were made to the satisfaction of the city building commissioner — until, it must be noted with some

irony, the “law had been exactly complied with” — and by late May, things were coming to a head.²⁶⁵

The *Tribune* reported that the sticking point on the theatre’s adherence to city ordinance was about whether the Iroquois, re-modeled, counted as a new theatre, or an extant one. This identification of the contention of the status of the building as new or extant clearly articulates the anxieties that Iroquois survivor communities were experiencing about the space. If the physical modifications to the space were sufficient to completely re-define the space as fundamentally new, then a significant link to the Iroquois disaster would be lost, in a manner similar to the re-writing of the spatial context of the Richmond Theatre into the Monumental Church. If, however, the physical modifications could not be said to constitute an entirely new space, the building would be forever haunted by its connection to the blaze, and would provide a public and shared space that would mark downtown Chicago with the violence and disaster of the past. Philosophically, the struggle between the elite-level governmental memory-work and the grass-roots memory-work is an example of Theseus’ Paradox, and when re-cast in this way, the question inherent in defining the space provides a cross-temporal resonance with Mayer’s 1907 questions to the jury members dealing with Will Davis’ case: “when is a theater owner not a theater owner?...When is an ordinance not an ordinance?”²⁶⁶ When is a theatre not a theatre? When is new not new? This philosophical paradox demonstrates how deeply the contentions surrounding the space penetrated into the public imagination.

On the 28th of May, George Williams — still in his role as building commissioner — refused to grant a license to Hyde & Behman for the reconstruction of the Iroquois, although Mayer and Marshall seemed confident the refusal would not last long, as they “announced...that the city will be compelled to give the permission” on the promise of a lawsuit by the members of

the VMA.²⁶⁷ Mayer and Marshall's confidence proved correct: on May 31st, Judge Edward Dunne identified the social tensions inherent in the case between victim communities and corporate interests. He ruled that the case was "a question of law, not of sentiment," and argued,

Suppose a man owned a private graveyard: he would have a right, if he complied with the ordinances, to run a vaudeville house in the graveyard. The owners of the property have a right to do anything he sees fit if he complies with all the laws of the states. If he does comply with them he has a right to run vaudeville in that charnel house.²⁶⁸

The ruling understandably upset the IMA, finding itself imbricated in the kind of legal struggles it had wanted to avoid. J.J. Reynolds, the President of the IMA, told the *Tribune* "I do not believe the general public wants to see the theater reopened and I still have doubts that it ever will be reopened."²⁶⁹ By September of that year, 1904, the building was, indeed, re-opened. JEO Pridmore, a renowned architect and member of the IMA, toured the building in mid-September, prior to its opening, and reported "this theater complies with the city ordinances in all except two particulars...there is a good deal wrong with the ordinance, however."²⁷⁰ In a remark dripping with irony, Pridmore, in discussing how many exits should be made available to patrons in the result of a fire, remarked, "the stage is the great danger point. Everyone must run away from it."²⁷¹ Though he was discussing the fact that the stage contained the most propensity for the creation of a disaster environment, it is tempting to read into Pridmore's statement that the stage — a synecdoche, here, for the practice of theatre generally — is sufficiently dangerous enough that *everyone* must run away from it and, by association, from Hyde & Behman's.

The IMA did not despair, and "issued an official condemnation for the project and protested against the city's licensing the theatre under the new management."²⁷² Reynolds argued,

I for one will fight this theater all the rest of my life. It is the disgrace of the city. No other community ever would allow it to open...No one but a morbidly curious person

ever would enter that theater. The men who bought the playhouse are relying on that curiosity.²⁷³

If “morbid curiosity” wasn’t precisely the truth behind Hyde & Behman’s professional interests in the building, no one told the *Tribune*. Upon the occasion of the reopening of the theatre under the Hyde & Behman name, the *Tribune* commissioned Northwestern Professor Walter Dill Scott, a pioneer in the field of applied psychology, to offer his analysis of the “Iroquois” audience in attendance the afternoon of September 18th, 1904. “Crowds, panics, stampedes, and all abnormal environments serve to emphasize some characteristic of the human mind which otherwise might escape our attention,” Scott wrote. “The Iroquois fire might thus have furnished a valuable experiment, showing the effect of terror upon a crowd.”²⁷⁴ Scott’s analysis provides an interesting read about the temporal process of memory and forgetting relevant to the Iroquois, and the performative aspects of such remembering and forgetting:

In the days after the fire it was frequently remarked that it would be forever impossible to open the theater again even if the name should be changed. It had been the scene of such a horror that it was thought impossible that intelligent beings could ever be induced to resort there for amusement and recreation... Why did the public say that it would never enter the door of the building, and now why does it crowd through the doors? One answer might be that the mind of man is affected more by time than we are aware of. The afflicted one believes that he will never again be able to be happy, that he will ever be weighed down by the thought of his great loss. As the days go by the burden becomes light and finally is nothing but a memory, with but an occasional sigh. Indeed, the sorrow itself may be the source of pleasure... We take pleasure in thinking of the hardships and afflictions which we have endured. The “luxury of grief” is no fiction... The fascination which a calamity has for the human mind has been abundantly exemplified by the events connected with the fire which took place within the Iroquois theater. Great throngs gathered about the burning building, went from morgue to morgue, and glutted their eyes with the sight of the dead. The building was closed soon after the fire and the public was not permitted to enter, but everything connected with the awful disaster became an object of morbid interest. Pedestrians planned to walk down Randolph Street just to take another look at the building. The passersby frequently stopped at the door of the theater and peered through a crack in the door, although nothing was visible... This scene of destruction and everything connected with it possesses a most remarkable fascination over the human mind, and points all too clearly to our descent from lower forms of life, in which the instinct to kill was necessary for preservation, but which in civilized society needs to be redirected or suppressed. The presence of this bestial predatory instinct in

man is the real cause of the morbid interest in the Iroquois theater, and it alone is sufficient to explain the thronging of the reopened playhouse.²⁷⁵

Scott's argument pinpoints a vital turn in the process of memory work: the point at which pain becomes pleasure, which he terms "the luxury of grief." Through Scott's lens, the site of the Iroquois served primarily to remind Chicagoans not of the disaster, death, and horror, but instead of the positive aspects wrought by disaster, the endurance of "hardships and afflictions." Further, Scott takes a stand against Reynolds' pinpointing Hyde & Behman's interest in the building as fundamentally trading on the deaths of its victims when he writes, "the presence of this bestial predatory instinct in man is the real cause of the morbid interest in the Iroquois theater."²⁷⁶ The "morbid curiosity" may be instead understood as a positive suppression or redirection of natural, violent urges. Understood through Scott's analysis, the site of the Iroquois Theatre provided a valuable outlet for citizens to work through their dark and violent feelings regarding the blaze. Perhaps this was considered necessary owing to the fact that there were no other sites of memory — *milieux de memoire* — through which these feelings could be similarly worked out, and given that the civic and social rites associated with grass roots memory-work had given way to a series of floundering legal proceedings in attempts to assign guilt.

The VMA opened Hyde & Behman's Music Hall on the 19th of September to an audience described by the *Tribune* as "blasé," but which, as the performance continued, "lightened up, laughed, had a good time."²⁷⁷ "Never was a theatrical performance given under greater tensions," reads a September 20th article,

It passed without mishap more serious than the blocking of a curtain — an incident which caused the audience a moment of bated breath — but those in a position of responsibility did not feel a lessening of the strain until they were assured by the sight of the emptied playhouse that their fears of something unexpected and menacing were groundless."²⁷⁸

As part of their redesign, Hyde and Behman had re-decorated the building, with “lights and bright colors, mainly brilliant red,” that “everywhere sought to remove the memory of gloom.”²⁷⁹ Indeed, even the famous Indian bust, provided by Will Davis, which had adorned the outside of the building, was replaced by “the head of a woman — a laughing woman with roses in her hair.”²⁸⁰ What once signified Davis’s fascination with leadership, and served to frame the Iroquois as a world leader in theatre design and experience, now framed an environment of mirth, merriment, and forgetting. This metatheatrical performance, the performance *before* the performance — a performance of architectural memory, of the self-conscious design of time and space — drew “two audiences” to the theatre that afternoon that stood in opposition to one another:

One sought the interior and held checks for seats and boxes. It was silent when it entered, but afterwards it was [sic] feverishly gay...the other staid in the street, some portion of it treading a somber, curious way into and out of the outer foyer of the theater. This audience did not have even a superficial interest in the stage scenes of the night. It cared only to gaze into the electric lighted cavern of the foyer. Its interest was based on studying those who entered and on speculation.

All the evening it remained there, varying only slightly in numbers...the outside audience was free with its comments. Its manner, however, was quiet. Only one emotional outburst marked the evening on the sidewalk.

The center of it was a working man. He walked up to the entrance, shook his first toward the glare of the lights, and cursed the playhouse, its proprietors, and the city officials, blaming the latter for permitting the opening of the house.

“My wife and my sister-in-law were burned to death in that place,” he said, with a sob in his voice, to the detective who asked him to move on....

A man who declared himself a philosopher said he was glad the theater was open.

“No human emotion,” he said, “is so acute but that time, the healer, will soften and salve it. It is better so. We could not exist if the memory of pain and sorrow always remained keen in our breasts.”²⁸¹

The *Tribune*’s coverage of the opening of Hyde & Behman’s Music Hall continues the trend of using metatheatrical vocabulary to discuss and frame the disaster, indicating an awareness of the power of performance to hold sway over the construction of post-disaster environments of remembering and forgetting. The *Tribune* explicitly constructs Hyde &

Behman's Music Hall as an essentially contested site of memory where the performances of dual narratives of memory work can be read: two audiences, one outside, one inside, both viewing performances, both ascribing value to the memory of the dead. The value is inscribed in competing ways, whether by trying to move on through participation in the light comedic stylings on the stage of Hyde & Behman's, or by trying to revive the fading memory of the dead through participation in the voyeuristic and objective spectacle afforded by Hyde & Behman's customers walking into the building. Note also how the *Tribune* refers to the space alternately as the Iroquois and Hyde & Behman's, suggesting that the space was doubly-occupied by both the present Hyde & Behman's, and the absent Iroquois.

Carlson's term "ghosted" applies, as the building can be understood as "the identical thing...encountered before, although now in a somewhat different context. Thus, recognition not of similarity, but of identity."²⁸² The dual audience's competing readings of the identical, but simultaneously different, building reveal important facets of their identity. "Theatre," Carlson argues,

Has always provided society with the most tangible records of its attempts to understand its own operations. It is the repository of cultural memory, but, like the memory of each individual, it is also subject to continual adjustment and modification as the memory is recalled in new circumstances and contexts. The present experience is always ghosted by previous experiences and associations while these ghosts are simultaneously shifted and modified by the process of recycling and recognition.²⁸³

The purposefully metatheatrical vocabulary of the *Tribune*'s coverage of the post-disaster period, as well as Carlson's rhetorical invocation of a thanatological framework, allows for an application of Carlson's point to the reading of the building itself. Operating simultaneously at sociocultural and individual levels, the building provided a focal point for the shifting and modification of recycling and repetition of the violence of the afternoon of December 30th, 1903. In many ways, Carlson's points reinforce those made by Bos, Ullberg, and 't Hart, who argue

that memory and forgetting are constructed through networks of social interactions, as defined by Maurice Halbwach:

While social or cultural memory has often been understood as the collective sum of its individual parts, Halbwach's claims that all individual memory is socially produced, insofar that individuals re-script their memories through the recollection of others. Networks of sociality thus define what experiences are to be recalled (memory) and which are to be forgotten (oblivion.)²⁸⁴

Through these theoretical insights, I argue that the “ghosting” of historical events must be understood within a “network of sociality” that implies a process of memory-work that can be constructive and/or destructive, depending largely on the on-going contestation between “a political encounter between grass-roots memory and the elite-level, political ‘processing’ of disasters.”²⁸⁵ While theatre may indeed be connected with the cultural and personal processes of ghosting, theatre history is similarly concerned with those processes. The insight Bos, Ullberg and 't Hart (and Halbwach) provide is that “historical ghosting” — which I define as the reading of historical material through the cultural and personal processes of previous experiences and associations, and the shifting and modification of those processes undertaken within a network of sociality — demonstrates that the (re)construction of disaster memory is a contested and on-going dispute between the personal and the cultural. Understood within the context of disaster sociology, memory, forgetting, and historical narrative are inextricably bound to the contestations between the grass-roots memory-work of survivor communities, and the elite-level political processing of disaster events.

The Right Thing to Close

Despite the horror that marked the space as significant and potentially memorial, the presence and dispute of the two audiences at the theatre that evening revealed that, though the IMA and others continued the fight for memory, the battle to preserve the memory of the fire

was a losing one, and perhaps it was already lost. The IMA had failed to secure the space for the purpose of building a memorial hospital, and although they didn't drop the hospital project entirely, the more pressing and immediate concern for them was the upcoming anniversary of the disaster, which they had started calling "Iroquois Day." The IMA issued requests to all theatres to close their doors to audiences during the 30th, in the middle of the lucrative Holiday season theatrical run. C. E. Kohl, who owned the Chicago, Olympic and Haymarket Theaters, declined. "I do not intend to close," he told the *Tribune*, "even if all the other theaters in town do so. I have a family to support and I already have lost too much money by the fire of last winter. The only proposition I would consider would be to close if all the merchants in the city suspended business and the day was turned over to church services."²⁸⁶ Archie Ellis, who was made manager of Hyde & Behman's, took a softer approach: "Personally," he said,

I believe it would be the right thing to close the theater Friday afternoon, but that is for Mr. Hyde and Mr. Behman to decide. They will be here on Wednesday, and I believe they have decided on some action in the matter. They are peculiar men and might decide to hold religious services in the theater for all I know. I believe they will do the right thing.²⁸⁷

The right thing, as it turned out, was evidently to plan to keep the theatre open. "It is no more than I expected," IMA President J. J. Reynolds said in reply. "If Hyde and Behman's closes it will be because they have measured the thing by the dollar."²⁸⁸ The IMA had appealed to Mayor Harrison, who replied he had no control in the matter. "We knew Mayor Harrison had no power under the law to close the theaters," responded J. J. Reynolds. "The mayor is only quibbling when he evades the question in that way. I am not surprised, however. It is his way to get out of things and shirk responsibility."²⁸⁹ It is difficult not to read in Reynolds' response to Harrison's refusal a note of anger about the slightly suspicious way in which he found himself acquitted of guilt.

At the last minute, Hyde & Behman closed the theatre for the afternoon of the 30th of December, perhaps, claimed the *Tribune*, as a result of the printing of “the Tribune’s protest in word and picture.”²⁹⁰ The first anniversary was a day of sorrow for the city, and an illustration of the importance of opportunities for grieving socially. Mourners “wept with each other, grasped each other’s hands, and prayed and listened to the hopeful words spoken by three pastors of the faith.”²⁹¹ The anniversary gave new and special meaning to the act of remembering, as anniversaries tend to do; nine hundred people attended services at Willard Hall, with three hundred persons “packed in the corridors, unable to gain an entrance” to the building.”²⁹² Meanwhile, at Hyde & Behman’s, “another crowd blocked the pavement before the darkened portals of the theater that was the Iroquois. The row of doors was locked as on that afternoon a year ago, but this time the crowd that pressed against them was without instead of within.”²⁹³ A telegram glued to the interior of the door read: “closed during memorial service.”²⁹⁴ The building opened back up that evening for its scheduled performance, “one year after the night of that terrible carting away of the dead, those agonized rounds of the morgue.”²⁹⁵

Hyde & Behman’s lasted less than a year. I argue that, in some measure, this was because of a failure to properly redefine the space as anything but the Iroquois, as evidenced by an August 1905 theatrical gossip column in the *Tribune*:

The Iroquois...is to have another change of name. Having failed...as Hyde & Behman’s, it now...is to be re-christened the Colonial...Klaw & Erlanger, however, will supply the theater with its attractions, and there is no reason to doubt the firm’s active control of the house. By the look of the reputed plans, a strenuous effort is to be made to restore the theater to a first class rank. To this end, it is declared that the best that the syndicate has will be sent to the house.²⁹⁶

The placement of this piece of gossip carries with it some irony; directly above this, the *Tribune* reported, “aggressive warfare against the theatrical syndicate has been begun by the

organization of independent managers.”²⁹⁷ The Syndicate re-involved itself in the Iroquois even as they began to lose their grip on booking power in the United States.

On the first day of 1907, a real estate transaction appeared in the *Tribune*, which read the following:

Levy Mayer bought from Arthur T. Lyman, A. Lawrence Lowell and Arthur Lyman, trustees, the fee under the Colonial theatre for \$350,000. This, including 110x37.5 feet north of the Real Estate Board building, was leased in 1902 to the Iroquois Theater Company for ninety-nine years at \$24,900 a year. Mr. Mayer’s purchase was on about a 5 per cent basis.²⁹⁸

It was Mayer’s brilliant legal maneuverings that assured Davis’s freedom in March of 1907. It was through this relationship — one that, by the time the trial was finally over in 1907, had been three years running — that Mayer must have made the acquaintance of Klaw and Erlanger. When, in February of 1907, Klaw and Erlanger “announced plans to enter the vaudeville arena” and “declared their goal of uplifting vaudeville from its lowbrow associations” through what they called “advanced vaudeville,” it became clear that Mayer was in business with the struggling Syndicate.²⁹⁹ By that summer, Mayer was “secretly dispatched...to Europe on board the *Kronprinz Wilhelm* to formalize arrangements with the European managers and theatre owners,” and help Klaw and Erlanger expand their operation globally.³⁰⁰

The connection between Mayer and the Syndicate grew out of the ashes of the Iroquois, and when Mayer purchased the land under the Colonial, it seems obvious, given his growing business association with the men, that he did so with the understanding that he could help ensure that Klaw and Erlanger took the space back. His creative, theatrical, and impassioned defense of Will J. Davis was owed, in some regard, to his considerable financial stake in the growing relationship between him and the members of the Syndicate. Mayer’s purchase of the building can be understood as an attempt to re-write the history of the location, or at the very

least, to advance the history past a civic memory of the fire. The Colonial Theatre continued, with some level of success, into May of 1924, when the theatre, again under the management of Harry J. Powers, was closed, with plans for the demolition of the building to make way for “a new nineteen story United Masonic temple.”³⁰¹

It is this temple that stands in the place of the Iroquois today, although the building’s listing in the National Register of Historic Place reads “New Masonic Building and Oriental Theatre.” The building opened as a deluxe cinema house in 1926. It is better known today as the Ford Center for the Performing Arts Oriental Theatre, one of the major theatre houses in Chicago. The Loop today is obviously vastly different from its 1903 configuration. A casual walker of the city would have no idea of the significant relationship between the conflagratory disaster and the organization of civic space; I walked the streets around the neighborhood that same cold January day I visited the Montrose Cemetery marker, trying to feel some of the presence of the Iroquois disaster. I walked directly past an unassuming alleyway near the theatre, not realizing its significance: Couch Alley remains, primarily as a way for the loading and unloading of set pieces into the Oriental, as well as the Gene Siskel Film Center. In *Cities of the Dead*, Joseph Roach identifies the relationship between architectural innovation “and social organization” as an example of “what Nora calls ‘places’ or sites of memory,” and to which Roach refers as “vortices of behavior.”³⁰² Roach also argues that such social organization creates what he calls “kinesthetic imagination,” which he defines as “a way of thinking through movements — at once remembered and reinvented — the otherwise unthinkable.”³⁰³ Understood through Roach’s insight, the re-organization of the space around the spot the Iroquois stood creates a physical “vortex of behavior” always already imbricated within the act of significant

remembering. That is, in trying to re-organize the cityscape to help forget the Iroquois, Chicago may have accidentally developed an invisible way of performing memory.

The history of the space of the Iroquois disaster is one of contestation, as victims and survivors struggled against corporate and governmental interests to control the narrative of the disaster. It seems that, in this case, the corporate interests were better served, and while material produced about the Oriental — and, indeed, the Colonial — makes reference to the significance of its spatial memory, it is usually confined to only a handful of lines that gloss over the horrors of December 30th, 1903. The difficult history of the transforming space following the disaster — from charnel house and graveyard to vaudeville and comedy, from the reintroduction of the Syndicate to the failure and eventual “resurrection” of the space as a legitimate spot of theatrical production — suggests the extent to which memory-work was greatly complicated and defined by the disputes between parties with competing interests. It is also worth noting that the metatheatrical rhetoric of memory that concerned the space can be read as an agent in positioning the space as continually theatrical; that the building itself remains a house of theatrical production today was perhaps, given the volatile and interrelated nature of theatre, disaster and memory, inevitable: it would always be marked in some way by its association with the nature of performance. There is, perhaps, no better way to forget the past then by continually reconstructing it in and as present.

Popular Testimonial of a Popular Sorrow

In *The Popular Culture of Disaster*, Gary Webb asks, “is it possible for a single event to permanently alter social life? And, if so, how has that event changed things? Does everybody perceive those changes in the same way? Is there agreement or disagreement on the desirability of those changes?”³⁰⁴ That the definition and narrative of the Iroquois disaster, and so the

memory of the event, was bitterly disputed between several groups is a point illustrated throughout this case study. Webb's sets of questions suggests that the value ascribed to change wrought by disaster is equally as contested, and to understand how memory-work functions in the post-disaster time period, one must give attention to what is culturally produced:

Following catastrophic events, survivors and responders also engage in a wide range of cultural production. They tell jokes and share stories about the events. Buildings are spray-painted with graffiti to convey messages of hope, humor, or frustration. New rituals are enacted to provide order and meaning to their lives, including those surrounding the handling of the dead. Makeshift memorials are created to allow survivors the opportunity to share their emotions and remember those they lost. And poems and songs are written in efforts to make sense of what happened.³⁰⁵

This section covers the numerous "new rituals," "makeshift memorials," and the struggle to remember through memorialization by the IMA. The Iroquois Memorial Hospital was the largest act of cultural production undertaken towards constructing a physical memorial to the victims of the fire, and the one most fraught with the most complications and disputes. At every turn, the IMA was being resisted in their efforts to fund and open the hospital. Above, I detailed the IMA's failed attempts to claim the space of the fire for their hospital; while they lost that battle, they did not give up on either the hospital, nor procuring the space — a December 31st, 1912 article in the *Tribune* quotes IMA member Henry M. Shabad as saying,

Never will Chicago condone the catastrophe until a memorial has been erected on the fire site. We cannot sleep at night while knowing that the site where our loved ones were lost is devoted to revelry and pleasure. The theater that is now there must be closed and a memorial for our dead must be built and consecrated to humanity. As long as there is blood in our veins we must strive for this end.³⁰⁶

The Iroquois Memorial Hospital was funded in the amount of \$40,000 by the efforts of the Iroquois Memorial Association to "provide instant and free attention to downtown victims of accidents, the lack of which, it was said, was the cause of many of the deaths resulting from the fire."³⁰⁷ Because the IMA could not procure the grounds of the theatre to build their hospital, an

alternate site was approved at 23 North Market Street.³⁰⁸ The hospital was to be “a popular testimonial of a popular sorrow,” according to the IMA.³⁰⁹ It was not until 1908, a year after the legal processing of the disaster had finally come to an end, that the drive to raise funds was complete. The *Tribune* remarked upon the city’s acquiescence to build the hospital, writing “the long felt need of an emergency hospital in the downtown part of Chicago is about to be met,” but noted grimly that “no memorial will ever express the feeling of those whose homes were darkened by an awful tragedy.”³¹⁰

Although the funds had been successfully raised in 1908, the cornerstone to the hospital was not laid until October of 1910, as “grief and sorrow alternated with joy and happiness in the faces of members of the Iroquois Memorial Association.”³¹¹ Just as the Iroquois itself was built upon a cornerstone filled with various materials, marking the space with irony and opposition, so, too, was the Iroquois Memorial Hospital built upon a cornerstone filled with significant markers; while they could not procure the actual space in which the Iroquois, the IMA nevertheless signified that the Hospital was literally built upon the disaster itself when Samuel H. Regensberg, then President of the IMA, placed into the cornerstone “a sealed copper box, containing a history of the holocaust, the names of the victims, and a record of facts relating to the hospital.”³¹² J.E.O. Pridmore, who designed the hospital “of brick and stone and of fireproof construction,” used the occasion to position the city as guilty of working to dismiss the victims of the fire; however, Pridmore’s remarks also played upon the trope of essential contestation that defined the post-disaster paradigm of the Iroquois by mentioning the political reform that had been wrought by the destruction:

Other cities have made such places sacred. It is a blot on the ethical standard of Chicago that her citizens should seek amusement and pleasure within these walls...yet, after all, millions of people are now living more securely because of the negligence that cost 600 lives. A wave of reform swept the whole world immediately after the fire, and more

precautions were made for public safety. The site of the Iroquois theater, however, should be covered by a fitting memorial to those who died there, and Chicago should not rest until this is accomplished.³¹³

The Iroquois Memorial officially opened to the public on January 16th, 1911. The opening day of the hospital was marked by a bout of irony; as if the building needed to live up to its namesake, shortly before the doors officially opened at 8:00 AM, “fire was discovered in a pile of excelsior in the rear of the place.” Before the fire department arrived, though, “spectators had extinguished the blaze,” and the fire was ruled accidental.³¹⁴ “Some one probably threw a lighted cigar into a pile of shavings that were left in the alley following the unpacking of some surgical instruments,” explained Dr. Matthew Karasek, who served as the head of the hospital.³¹⁵

As part of the hospital’s memorial functions, the IMA commissioned Lorado Taft to design a tablet that would “be placed in the main waiting room of the Iroquois Memorial Hospital.”³¹⁶ Although the tablet was dedicated on the eighth anniversary, in 1911, the Tribune published word of the tablet’s commission as part of the hospital’s memorial functions in October 1910, and an image of the eventual tablet was published in December of that same year.³¹⁷ A Chicago area artist who dealt primarily in sculpture, Taft trained at the *École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts* in Paris from 1880 until 1883. When he returned to America, Taft taught at the Art Institute of Chicago. Along with his noted accomplishments as a sculptor, Taft is equally well-regarded as an art historian and critic. His sculptures are located through the world and are often constructed with a specifically memorial function.

The tablet was officially unveiled around the eighth anniversary of the fire, December 31st, 1911, by Maud Jackson, the same woman around whose dead daughter the state’s attorney had built their failed case against Will Davis. The *Tribune* described the tablet as “a bas-relief in plaster, showing the Motherhood of the World protecting the children of the universe, the body

of a child borne on a litter by herculean male figures, with a bereaved mother bending over it.”³¹⁸

Taft’s description of his own work, however, provides a more nuanced understanding of the piece. Taft explained,

I chose for the central figure Sympathy, personified by a woman. The worldwide need for sympathy and the almost as great desire to dispense it I wanted to introduce by a procession of humanity, some of them takers, some of them givers, but all deeply impressed by the significance of the dominating figure. As gradually the symbol of Sympathy became a living reality to me I began to understand that my main figure was another interpretation of the Madonna, and that all former painting and statues of her were inspired, like mine, by the desire to grasp the spirit of sympathy.³¹⁹

While Taft’s Iroquois Hospital work was a smaller undertaking, it is noteworthy that the tablet shares numerous similarities with one of his greatest and most accomplished sculptures, 1922’s *Fountain of Time*, located in Chicago’s Midway Plaisance, and started contemporaneously with the Iroquois tablet. Both works of art are concerned with the inevitable passage of time, and the detached — one might say dispassionate — observation of the struggles of humanity by a figure that dominates the work: Sympathy for the Iroquois, Father Time for the Plaisance. In both installations, it is difficult not to read into the struggle of humanity against, through, or under forces that operate far above our ability to conceive of them in meaningful terms: Sympathy and Time, the Madonna and a scythe wielding metaphor for the inevitability of death. As the Henry Austin Dobson poem, *The Paradox of Time*, which served as inspiration for *Fountains of Time* reads, “time goes, you say? Ah, no! /Alas, Time stays, we go.”³²⁰

In 1932, it was brought to the attention of the IMA by the city of Chicago that the hospital was in a state of serious disrepair and financial burden, and “for the first time in nearly three decades the anniversary service” of the Iroquois disaster “was held without a single reminiscence of the tragedy, without any of the vestiges of a memorial meeting. The score or more of individuals present were too absorbed in the bursting of the verbal bombshell tossed into their

midst, too concerned for the future of the institution, to spend discussion on the past.”³²¹ The President of the Board of Health of Chicago, Dr. Herman Bundensen, was the one to deliver the news:

Twenty-nine years after this tragedy, the question is whether to continue this memorial hospital or close it. Whether it still is serving a useful purpose or whether the city might be better served by shifting its facilities to other hospitals near the Loop, where expert surgical services not available here would be provided in the case of a serious accident in the Loop district. The solution might be to have a memorial surgical hospital.

We ought either to have such a first class surgical institution or realize what is not being done here. In the city budget Iroquois is set up as under the supervision of the city physician. Actually, we have had no city physician for some years and the mayor has asked me to take charge. He wants to do the right thing. As broke as the city is, Mayor Cermak is making an honest effort to cut taxes. So what is the board of health to run this institution on?...

Expert surgical care is needed when there is a bad accident. There is neither equipment nor personnel there to provide it. The place is pitifully inadequate as to equipment, even rudimentary. Nurses have worked here in twelve hour shifts a day, without a single day off for the last year, either Sundays or holidays. The hospital is closed at midnight and opens at 8 in the morning. It cannot handle surgical cases and sometimes the delay of bringing them here, then taking them onto another hospital means the difference between life and death.

The question is, even if the finances can be raised, are we justified in retaining this institution, or should it be closed or made into a good surgical hospital really adequate to handle emergency cases.³²²

The IMA was faced with a harsh reality: their memorial hospital no longer served the needs of the citizens of Chicago, and the memory of the fire at the Iroquois — as it had been since the day it occurred — was inextricably tied up in political and financial concerns. The hospital was closed in January 1935, although the building later served as a tuberculosis clinic and, during World War II, “the structure was used as headquarters for civilian defense.”³²³ The building was demolished in 1951.³²⁴ The fate of Taft’s tablet was a mystery until, in 1967, the sculpture was “discovered...in a corner of the City Hall basement,”³²⁵ by building engineer Frank McDonough, “corroded and covered with dirt.” McDonough estimated the tablet had been

stored there for “at least 25 years,” and said “he ha[d] no idea how it happened to be placed in the basement.”³²⁶

It is impossible to determine precisely when the Taft tablet found it’s way to the basement of Chicago’s City Hall, although between 15 and 25 years is not a bad guess, if we assume the tablet was removed sometime between the 1935 closing of the hospital and the 1951 demolition of the building. Either way, the misplaced, forgotten, corroded, dirt-covered tablet serves as a strong metaphor for the struggle between the power of elite-level, governmental narratives about the disaster and grass-roots memory work. For a city that has performatively marked itself with the memory of the Great Chicago Fire — a star on the city’s flag represents that particular blaze — the notion of widespread public apathy toward a much more deadly fire setting in after only seven years, coupled with the city’s reluctance to allow the construction of the hospital in the footprint of the Iroquois, and the city’s treatment of the Taft tablet, demonstrates the rapid devaluation of the event. When the city closed the building, and ultimately demolished it, they performed the ultimate act of forgetting by burying the primary extant memorial in their basement, completing the work of a narrative of forgetting that started in the legal systems: no one was guilty and no one would remember. No longer “a popular sorrow,” the memory of the Iroquois disaster was misplaced, forgotten, corroded, dirt-covered, and quick to fade; Arthur Hornblow’s prescient words proved correct.

Today, the tablet hangs in the lobby of City Hall, adorned with a small memorial plaque explaining its significance. On that January morning as we took in the memorial, Jane, a Chicago transplant and occasional river tour guide — a virtual font of Chicago ephemera — illustrated the problematic and troubled nature of the civic memory of the fire when she asked me “so, wait. I don’t know the story. What exactly happened?” That the tablet hangs today is a sign of nothing

so much as the city of Chicago finally owning up to the institutional contributions they made towards, first, creating a disaster-prone environment through lax enforcement of fire safety regulations and, second, to forgetting the disaster.

Like To Forget

The IMA's hospital, and the struggles surrounding the building and administration of that hospital, represents far and away the most public attempts at memorial undertaken by the survivors of the fire. The hospital was not the only attempt to create a memorial, however. In the early absence of a memorial site, other, more esoteric forms of performative memorials developed as ways to perpetuate memory of the disaster. The best known example of these kinds of "new rituals...to provide order and meaning" to survivors' lives was the annual ringing of the fire bell that first sounded the alarm at the corner of Clark and Randolph Streets — Box 26. In 1903, Michael Corrigan was a rookie fire fighter, but as the years passed, Corrigan became the Fire Commissioner in 1937, and participated in ringing the alarm at 3:32 PM — the same time he sent the alarm on December 30th, 1903 — from the one-year anniversary in 1904 until the anniversary alarm was silenced for the first time in fifty-five years in December 1960, owing to the fact that, according to the *Tribune*, "now most of the survivors are dead."³²⁷ Corrigan apparently rued this annual performance; by 1949, he told the *Tribune* "I have a queer feeling doing this," and said in 1960, upon the box's retirement, "he too would like to forget, but he can't..."

As I have illustrated through these three case studies, new behavioral patterns emerge in the post-disaster paradigm, undertaken to re-establish a form of order in a disrupted sociocultural context. In this section, I provide an illustration of re-vitalizing one such behavioral pattern. I argue that there are performed, memorial actions that can be understood through Joseph Roach's

theory of surrogation as an “invisible ritual of every day life.”³²⁸ In the disrupted post-disaster paradigm, new behavioral patterns are identified through their significant link to the disaster event. As these new patterns become firmly established in everyday ritual, they begin to lose their significance and, through repetition, become performative facets of a newly ordered society. To trace the history of such a ritual is to re-vitalize and re-significate its link to disaster. Understood this way, these ritualized performances of everyday life can be understood as invisible memorials, small behavioral resistances to the violence done by elite-level memory-work against grass-roots survivor communities. They are defined simultaneously by their physical omnipresence, and the voided absence of their invisible significance.

The best illustration of this kind of memorial is the invention and frequent use of the crash bar. It’s an action we’ve all done, our arms full as we walk hip-first into a door, depressing the flat, bronze bar into its recess, unlatching the door, swinging it outwards, and allowing for a hands-free exit. The device is properly called a Von Duprin Device, and its design allows a door to remain locked from the outside while simultaneously allowing those inside the ability to leave without the necessity of unlocking the door. Imagine the panic gripping Iroquois audience members who ran for the door, only to find the doors were both locked, and built to open inward. Now imagine hundreds of other audience members, crushing up against each other and the door, trampling, smashing and suffocating each other in a desperate attempt to escape. Many of the deaths at the Iroquois were preventable with simple changes in architecture and hardware design. The invention of the Von Duprin Device was catalyzed by recognition of the simplicity of these changes, which became an object of some obsession for Carl Prinzler.

Following the Iroquois fire, Prinzler, an employee at the Indiana-based Vonnegut Hardware Company in 1903, became driven with a desire to ensure that no such horror would

occur ever again. This drive was the result of the fact that Prinzler, in Chicago on business in late December 1903, had tickets to see *Mr. Blue Beard* on December 30th at the Iroquois, and was called back to Indianapolis for meetings at the last minute. With his neighbor, Henry DuPont, Prinzler designed and built the first panic bar exit device, and sold the device to the Vonnegut Hardware Company, Prinzler's employer; the device took the name Von Duprin — Vonnegut, DuPont, and Prinzler.³²⁹ Within a few decades, installing panic bars in public and semipublic buildings was strictly required by fire code legislation worldwide. As this enforcement became normalized, it transformed into an invisible ritual, an unconscious citation of the fire and those lost. By re-vitalizing this memorial performance, this tragedy, often a footnote in theatre's history can be re-contextualized as a vital part of the material of the theatre itself. Ellen MacKay argues "what links fourteenth-century Paris to seventeenth-century London to twentieth-century Chicago is a stubborn failure to learn from disasters of the past."³³⁰ Perhaps the greatest memorial to the Iroquois Theatre is that we have finally learned from our mistakes.

Creating permanent physical memorials to the dead proved a much more daunting task, illustrated in some regard by the preceding account of the Iroquois Memorial Hospital. On the first anniversary of the blaze, Jenkin Lloyd "Jenk" Jones, a Unitarian minister in the city, called upon the citizens of Chicago to shift their reality from mourning towards remembering. "Dear friends," he said,

It is better our grief should not press too hard. It is well to remember that we live in a loving world. There was a time when the breaking heart resented the shining of the sun; when the stars seemed to mock our grief. But that time is past. It is now time to gather together and rejoice that by our sorrow we are assured that we live in an ordered universe, and are part of an order divinely economic, which suffers no waste, no loss. Today it becomes us to fit our grief to the growing wants of man. It is a pleasure to learn the lessons of grief. A year ago this morning we people gathered here were divided in classes and parties and creeds. A year ago tonight darkness settled down over a city united in one brotherhood of sorrow. All divisions were swept away; we staggered under one common load of grief.³³¹

Note that Jones constructs this shift in terms of the realization that “we live in an ordered universe,” mirroring the disaster sociology argument for defining disaster through its power to disrupt the systems of order that underlie everyday life. Jones continued, arguing that a physical location for memory was the next step in Chicagoans accepting the disaster as passed, and society (and the universe) as “ordered.” He couched this call for a *lieu de memoire* in a critique of Chicago as essentially a city that is always forgetting:

By virtue of the last twelve months, we are confronted with a new opportunity. Alas for the country that forgets its annals as some one has said; for the country with no memorial days and no conspicuous consecrations. For Chicago this memorial today is a beggarly thing. Chicago is poor enough already in landmarks and events that it commemorates. I want this community to have common shrines; without, the life of the community will suffer. It is a sad story, this disregard of conventions in this city. Once our first churches were located in the central part of the town, some of them on free lands. Then at the behest of the real estate dealer they had to take unto themselves wheels and move out of the way. Thus Chicago has suffered for want of landmarks; thus Chicago has lost in spiritual life. Here is your chance to rescue one spot and consecrate it to a higher sensibility. Not only may it be consecrated to mangled limbs, but also would I consecrate it to the higher life of the community.³³²

Jones’s critique proved prescient. The struggle to physicalize the memory of the victims of the Iroquois Theatre mirrored the legal battles in length and intensity. To analyze the history of Iroquois memorials expands upon the narrative tropes of dispute and contestation that were developed in the post-disaster paradigm by elite-level governmental processes of memory production. The two phenomena that I have argued are mostly closely associated with those tropes — legal application of guilt and social memory — are intimately linked, as illustrated by the Taft tablet. The long, protracted, and ultimately failed attempts to assign legal blame for the disaster reinforces the “monumental” struggles to create sites of memory; memory is always implied by memorial constructions to be an ethical and moral mandate.

In 1908, the IMA finally dedicated a permanent memorial marker at Montrose Cemetery, the same one I visited on that cold January morning in 2013. Huge and heavy looking, with moss stains and scars playing at its edges, the lettering shallow and difficult to read in the grey morning light, the marker sits off Pulaski Street, far enough inside the cemetery ground that you have to venture inwards to see it. This is not a joyous celebration of the lives of those lost; this is a cold, business-like reminder of the permanence of death. Andrew Kircher, owner and operator of Montrose Cemetery, “realized that no memorial had been erected to memorialize the tragedy, [and] took it upon himself to do so.”³³³ The memorial, then, may be read as an attempt to create a “social process of remembering” in a very literal sense, as the creator of the memorial was a member of society trying to help others remember. However, the location of the memorial deserves some consideration, as well; the cemetery implores remembrance and exists to link us to our past. The memorial was created with the aid of the IMA, founded by bereaved relatives of victims of the fire. The placement of the marker received very little coverage; a December 13th, 1908 blurb of approximately ten lines is the only coverage it received, letting readers know that “on [Dec. 16] the monument erected to the memory of the victims of the fire in Montrose cemetery, will be dedicated with a public service.”³³⁴

Located ten miles from downtown Chicago, the distance makes this memorial inaccessible to most of the public. Its placement, so far from downtown, pushed back from the road, means a visit must be a conscious act of memory. Though its spatial context — it shares cemetery grounds with many of the dead — reinforces the purpose of the memorial, its geographical removal from the site of the tragedy and from the crowded, busy downtown Chicago area weaken its ability to create an environment of memory. One cannot walk through the city of Chicago and see the memorial “traced upon the cityscape.” In this way, the memorial

loses its effectiveness to make manifest the lives lost in the fire. And yet, that morning, I saw a small set of red, plastic roses had been laid at the base of the memorial, a stark burst of crimson red against the granite, no doubt a lingering remainder of the fire's recent 110 year anniversary: someone remembered.

Conclusion

History Does Not End So

A central goal of disaster sociological research is to analyze evidence about multiple case studies in order to identify patterns of occurrence, behavior, and circumstance and, based on the identification and analysis of these patterns, to establish generalizable information about disasters. Robert Stallings defines the term generalizability as “researchers’ ability to make empirically grounded statements describing phenomena and relationships among phenomena that hold across all similar events.”¹ This conclusion is organized around identifying and extrapolating three generalizable principles about theatre fires I have uncovered, in order to demonstrate possible productive use of my methodology, and to provide guidance to future scholarly endeavors that take place at the intersections of theatre, performance, memory, history, and disaster.

The first of these three generalizable arguments is that theatre’s focus on developing technologies of spectacle outpaced the development of technologies of safety, and greatly contributed to the creation and sustenance of disaster-rich environments. The origins of each of these three fires can be traced, in some significant part, to the relationship between theatre production and the allure of spectacle, and to the development of technologies of spectacle that often far outstripped the capacity of extant technologies of hazard-mitigation.

It is no mistake that the three major technological advances in theatrical lighting are represented by these case studies: candlelight in Richmond, gaslight in Brooklyn, and electricity in Chicago. That each case study is marked by a different form of lighting technology illustrates the continual threat of disaster; further, it illustrates the danger posed by implementing new lighting technology was understood as an acceptable risk in service of creating spectacular

staging effects, and in each case, the desire to create spectacle contributed significantly to the disaster event. Adding to the danger of spectacle onstage was the spatial organization of performers, the audience, the set pieces, and the theatre building. Again, as with the lighting, the dangers inherent in the theatre spaces were treated as acceptable risks for audience members. In Richmond, the building was reportedly oft-regarded as a potential firetrap; constructed primarily of wood, and with weak and narrow stairs and dark hallways that made navigation overly difficult, the disaster at the Richmond Theatre was regarded, following the fire, as almost inevitable. Increasing the inherent dangers of the layout of space was the poor construction and use of technical elements of spectacle: the hemp rope and pulley system used to raise and lower chandeliers, and the over-abundance of highly inflammable painted set pieces re-enforce the inevitability of the conflagration.

In Brooklyn, the use of gas lighting had already created danger for performers and audience members when, previous to the fire, gas had ignited and sprayed from a loose hose backstage. The backstage area itself was badly cluttered with set pieces from shows past, and the action on-stage had required several dozen drop-flies to move the action of *The Two Orphans* around Paris. The numerous levels of seating, and the lack of stairways designed to provide access to those specific levels of seating, coupled with the lack of fire exits in Flood Alley, meant that the arrangement of the space of the theatre contributed towards creating the human panic that transformed the lobby into a hell mouth. Too, the building's L-shaped layout was blamed for causing much confusion for patrons as they attempted to leave the building safely.

In Chicago, spectacle operated significant purchase on the audience's experience of the production of *Mr. Blue Beard*, and of their experience of the theatre itself. The construction meta-theatrically positioned itself as a venue for performance insofar as the lobby was designed

to afford members of society the opportunity to see and be seen. One notes, too, that, like Brooklyn before it, the Iroquois Theatre was built in a L-shape, increasing the potential danger for audience members who would try to escape the flames the afternoon of December 30th, 1903. Reviews of the Theatrical Syndicate's production of *Blue Beard* almost universally praised the show's spectacular performance and technical elements, often noting that those elements were more important than the script itself. Iroquois management participated in the creation of spectacle by removing exit signs and blocking doors that would denigrate the beauty of the interior of the auditorium, and though there were some hazard-mitigation technologies in use, they were known to be almost entirely ineffective — the dry chemical Kilfyre — or so poorly implemented that they contributed to worsening the effects of the fire, as with the fire escape doors that swung out ninety degrees, blocking safe passage for anyone on a higher level. The highest concentration of deaths in each theatre stemmed from seating located above the floor level. Indeed, most often the floor level patrons cleared out with relative safety and speed. In Richmond, most deaths came from trying to navigate from the boxes through the dark, cramped hallways; in Brooklyn, most deaths were attributed to the piles of bodies that developed on stairway landings; in Chicago, most deaths were attributed to trying to escape from the fire escapes and down stairs into the lobby area.

The desire for spectacle outstripped hazard-mitigation technologies: this is obvious. What is less obvious is that the desire to create spectacle extended far beyond the limits of stagecraft to the architectural design of the theatre buildings themselves. The design and layout of the theatres helped create a spatial environment in which the possibility of disaster was heightened to a point of inevitability. Throughout this study, I've argued that disaster contributes to the reconfiguration

of space, but the inverse is also true: space contributes significantly to the writing of the disaster event.

The second generalizable principle is that fires were far more prevalent in theatre's history than the archives reflect, and were a common and accepted occupational hazard. The fires I've identified and written about were selected not for their similarities, which only became clear as I compiled research and wrote narratives, but for their status as the three most destructive and deadly fires in American theatre history. There are numerous other conflagrations that were left out. My intent was not to create a chronological history of theatre fires, but to evaluate how these events have been remembered and forgotten, and through what practices memory and forgetting were performed. In each case study, I identified the tendency of actors in the performing company to ignore the possible dangers posed by the presence of fire. The assumption was always that the backstage crew would succeed in putting the fire out quickly, quietly, and efficiently, so to alert the audience to the fire would be pointless, and would possibly cause more danger by inciting panic. As a generalized pattern of response, this behavior suggests that fires were a common and accepted occupational risk in the theatre as a workspace in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Eyre Massey Shaw, a member of the London Fire Brigade, had already identified the tendency of theatre buildings to erupt into deadly fires by 1876, when he published a short handbook entitled *Fires in Theatres*. The point of Shaw's work was to illustrate the breadth of the problem and, in doing so, to suggest some ways to improve upon the safeguarding of patrons lives. "The subject of preventing the sudden destruction of theatres by fire is one which must necessarily force itself on the attention of all who inhabit crowded cities," he argued, "and especially of those entrusted with the protection of helpless masses of persons of the occasion of

such catastrophes.”² Remarkably, Shaw’s book, which predates the conflagrations at both Brooklyn and Chicago, already presented a range of generalized information about theatre fires.

“I am not aware,” he wrote,

Nor do I believe that any one else is aware, whose business it is [to interfere in such a matter as fires in theatres], or whether it is the business of any one; and, in this state of utter vagueness and ignorance, I think it better to say what I have to say, and to send it forth for what it is worth, than to withhold it now and have to state it afterwards, perhaps on the occasion of some great catastrophe.³

In this passage, Shaw has identified the diffusion of responsibility that marks theatre fires, and helps contribute to disaster-prone environments. If, as I noted above, it was known that the theatre buildings and production practices far outstripped the development of technologies of safety, how could theatre producers possibly allow audience members to enter such dangerous spaces?

William Paul Gerhard’s 1896 work *Theatre Fires and Panics* provides statistical evidence of global theatre fires that illustrates the regularity of this particular kind of disaster. He writes,

There are numerous cases in which a fire breaking out in a theatre, on the stage, in the auditorium, or elsewhere, is at once extinguished by the stage hands, or by the firemen on duty in the building. Many cases of this kind never become known to the public or to the press, and no accurate record is kept of them...those fires which break out during a performance, when the building is crowded with people, are naturally the ones of greatest interest to us.⁴

Gerhard’s statistics, which collect data from the 1750s until the 1890s, illustrate not only the frequency of theatre fires, but also the frequency of multiple fires occurring at the same theatre, demonstrating the bizarre but pervasive tendency of theatres to burst into flames. He notes, collectively, 460 theatres that burned over the course of a century, and 523 theatres burned total. Among the total number, Gerhard notes there are “37 theatres which were burnt twice, 8 theatres which we burnt three times, 4 theatres which were four times,” and “1 theatre (the Bowery Theatre in New York) which was burnt five times; also one theatre in Spain, which burnt

down seven times.”⁵ Gerhard’s statistics also show that the less time a theatre building has existed, the more danger it was in to burn down. “Theatres,” he writes, “as a rule, do not attain an old age...For the United States the average life of a theatre is said to be only from 11 to 13 years.”⁶ Gerhard attributes this temporally associated danger — one that is born out by the three case studies of this dissertation — to the fact that the technologies of production, including those related most specifically to spectacle, are “rarely in perfect working order,” and to theatre employees who “have not as yet become accustomed to handling [those technologies], and are likewise unfamiliar with the rules of management.”⁷ This reinforces Scott G. Knowles argument that

Disasters are not external in some magical way to the realities of the human-shaped environment or political culture in which they occur. In fact, it is probably best understood the other way around. In the patterns of property destruction, in the communities damaged and those protected, in the technologies and policies available to limit or avoid them, a disaster mirrors the prevailing values of the society in which it occurs.⁸

That is, theatres are prone to bursting into flames specifically because of their existential relationship to spectacle. Remarkably, Gerhard’s analysis of the risks of fire to theatre suggests that the risk is lessened during the performance, and particularly heightened immediately preceding and immediately following the performance. He attributes these fluctuating levels of danger to “greater watchfulness...as regards open lights, the sources of heat, and other causes of fire,” that occur during the time of performance.⁹ However, while those might be the times that place the physical space in the most danger, mortal danger to the audience is obviously heightened during a performance.

This is by way of illustrating the point that theatre fires occurred with decided regularity, and even more than we know, because of the number of flare-ups and fires that occurred without ever reaching the eyes or ears of the audience. Nat Brandt, a reporter, and author of *Chicago*

Death Trap, wondered about the status of the regularity of theatre fires, and how they may have impacted members of the *Blue Beard* cast. He writes about the fire in Cleveland that preceded the Iroquois blaze, “the brief blaze in Cleveland was, it can be assumed, bruited about among the cast — how could it not be? — But they gave it less attention than might be expected of veteran performers.”¹⁰ In this question, Brandt has got the issue backwards: the performers gave the fire precisely the amount of attention it merited — likely none — *because* they were veteran performers. Gerhard’s statistics illustrates the breadth of the issue of theatre conflagrations, but also succeeds in illustrating, through absence, the number of fires lost to history.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, in the time immediately following disasters, governments and other groups compete to define the narrative of the disaster, resulting in archives composed of materials that contradict and challenge each other as much as they reinforce one another. In the introduction to this dissertation, I stated that my central purpose was to develop and illustrate a methodology to undertake historical research into disasters in American theatre history, with a specific focus on a trilogy of case studies involving theatre conflagrations. Disaster in theatre’s history is under theorized and understudied. Without a careful consideration of the sociological dimensions of cultural production undertaken in the post-disaster paradigm, a historian might be tempted to treat the disaster as a discrete temporal event, as opposed to the process-based approach I have employed herein. When the disaster is re-contextualized as an on-going process, defined more by its propensity for de-stabilizing and revealing the inefficiencies of theretofore invisible social structures, new sources of evidence emerges that provide valuable insight into the contestation of negotiations of memory between various groups of social actors.

I have argued that the post-disaster paradigms of each of these three fires can be read for their essentially contested nature, as various groups of social actors attempt to gain purchase on narrativizing the event and, in turn, on forming phenomenological structures that would come to dictate how the events were and are remembered. This contestation was primarily identified as the result of the competing narratives of elite-level governmental forces, and the grass-roots efforts of victim communities. I argued that, in this essentially contested paradigm, the politicization of memory-work should be foregrounded as governments attempted to assign blame legally, and survivors attempted to make sense of the carnage of the event through various memorial practices.

One implication of this point is that cultural production undertaken in the post-disaster paradigm is marked by the politics of its contribution towards, or obliteration of, remembering the disaster event. Throughout, I have operated under the assumption provided by disaster sociology that disaster, as a categorical term, is defined by their capacity for social disruption more than for their capacity for death and destruction. Cultural production in the post-disaster paradigm — newspaper articles, funeral services, religious sermons, legal struggles, the planning and construction of memorials, joke cycles, fiction, and urban mythology — attempts, in some regard, to re-establish and re-order society, in order to perpetuate the disaster process towards an end.

Elite-level governmental memory-work often takes the form of what Shaw identifies as “panic legislation,” or laws enacted in the post-disaster paradigm to avoid any further conflagrations.¹¹ In Richmond, “panic legislation” took the form of the abolishment of theatrical practices, while in Brooklyn and Chicago, panic legislation involved manipulating the organization of the auditorium space by widening aisles and installing crash bars. Of course, the

problem with panic legislation is that, while it ostensibly suggests the government is looking out for the best interest of its citizens, it can also be understood as tacit admission of the government's own shortcomings, which further problematizes reading post-disaster paradigm performances of elite-level processing as constitutive of memory-work.

On the side of victim communities, reading what was produced in the post-disaster paradigm can be best understood as forms of resistance against the hegemony of elite-level political practices. Most often, grass-roots memory-work was reactionary in that it often occurred as the result of fundamentally disagreeing with how the political machinations of memory distorted a survivor community's version of the truth of the disaster event. It is also the case that, as time progressed, grass-roots memory-work took a stronger stance against elite-level governmental processing; in Richmond, the political and grass-roots memory-work were almost indistinguishable, as citizens of Richmond participated with eagerness in the subscriptions competition to raise funds for the building of the Monumental Church. In Brooklyn, the memory-work was still fairly cooperative, although certain newspapers — the *New York Clipper*, in particular — noted the hypocrisy of some clergy members denouncing the practice of theatre whilst not also addressing the various church fires that had occurred over time. Still, the political and victim communities involved in the post-disaster paradigm in Brooklyn were generally friendly, and significant political support was provided to the Brooklyn Theatre Fire Relief Association. Chicago's Iroquois fire provided the surest and clearest sign of the acrimonious split between elite-level political memory-work and work undertaken by grass-roots survivor communities, with a long and protracted, and ultimately failed, attempt to assign some sort of blame for the fire.

The possible reasons for this evolution of memory-work are numerous. The central interpretation of evidence I have used throughout this dissertation illustrates one such reason. The flames of these conflagrations themselves directly contributed to relatively few deaths, all things considered; much more deadly was the human response to danger. Increasing the deadliness of the human response to danger was the design of the physical space of the theatre. Just as technologies of spectacle outpaced safety regulations and technologies, the identification and use of the tropes and vocabulary of theatrical spectacle outpaced other forms of memorial production in the early goings of the post-disaster paradigm. What is significant about the use of these metatheatrical tools is that they contributed significantly to how the disasters would be remembered.

In Richmond, these tools were primarily by clergy to advance an anti-theatrical reading of the disaster event through casting judgment upon the victims of the fires. This had the impact of marking the Richmond disaster within an explicitly religious memory paradigm, and may help to explain why Mary Gibbon Carter and Susan Archer Weiss undertook to re-write the legacy of James Gibbon; the implication of the anti-theatrical tone that dominated the immediate post-disaster moment of the Richmond Theatre fire was that the wages of attending theatre were death, and that God's perfect judgment meant that those who had died deserved such a fate. This would have necessarily included the respected war hero, but such a narrative fate did not befit his life, and certainly would not have been the way Mary Gibbon Carter wanted to remember her brother. It also helps to explain the Monumental Church as the memorial to the dead; just as the clergy adopted the language of theatre in order to play with the "inherent constructedness" of narrative to performatively cover-up any competing memories, the public subscription-based building of the Monumental Church can similarly be analyzed for its performative status of

(literally) covering up the dead of the Richmond Theatre fire. The memory of the event is forever, inextricably, linked to the religious performances that dominated the early post-disaster memory work.

In Brooklyn, the use of metatheatricity was positioned to build narratives of social awareness, activism, and positive sociopersonal transformation. This was most explicitly seen in the rhetoric used by clergy members to call for the people of Brooklyn to live their lives as a memorial to the dead. While in Richmond, theatrical performances and social gatherings were explicitly and legally forbidden following the theatre fire, members of the theatre community reacted immediately to make their performances part of that social activism, and numerous benefit performances were put on for the victims of the Brooklyn Theatre fire. The social activism that marked the construction of memory and narrative about the Brooklyn Theatre could be seen immediately as undertakers and mortuaries around the city began to send hearses to the theatre. Most notable, though, is the successful activism employed by the Brooklyn Theatre Fire Relief Association, who provided important funds to help provide relief and structure to the lives of survivors and victims' family members for many years, and who additionally provided for the construction of the memorial that now sits in Green-Wood Cemetery.

The Brooklyn Theatre fire also continued the trend of re-writing reality in the post-disaster paradigm, through the confabulations of Steele MacKaye, and through the power of the disaster narrative to re-write Kate Claxton's past and future. These, too, can be understood as examples of the dominance of social activist narrative. The story of Steele MacKaye positions his skills with theatrical innovation as being related to the Brooklyn fire. Although, as I argued, he likely was not present that night, by claiming the Brooklyn Theatre fire as the originary and inspirational event that contributed to the design and manufacturing of his fold-down chair,

MacKaye heeded the call of clergy in the Brooklyn area to live his life as a memorial. Claxton, too, came to embody self-as-memorial, although in her case, this existence was thrust upon her.

The memory-work relevant to the Iroquois Theatre fire was marked most specifically by the narratives of dispute, opposition, and failure that dominated the immediate post-disaster paradigm. As a trope, dispute and opposition were prevalent in the history of the theatre, from the laying of the cornerstone to the legal struggles to convict a guilty party to the numerous contestations that dotted the Iroquois Memorial Associations' work to, first, gain control of the Iroquois building, and then later, to provide for an emergency hospital in the downtown area. The IMA fought for years to gain purchase on the narrative of the disaster with, at best, mixed results; this is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than with the Lorado Taft bronze bas relief tablet that was commissioned for the Iroquois Memorial Hospital, which was found decades following the buildings demolition, dirt-covered, lost, and neglected in the basement of City Hall, illustrating the ultimate failure of the IMA's grass-roots memory work.

These three points are inter-related and, when read for their intersectionality, provide a response to Ellen MacKay's contention that "what links fourteenth-century Paris to seventeenth-century London to twentieth-century Chicago is a stubborn failure to learn from the disasters of the past."¹² There are, of course, undoubtedly similarities between each of the three case studies I've used in this dissertation, and at first, I believed those similarities reinforced MacKay's point. However, I've come to believe that what links theatre fires together is not a stubborn refusal to learn from the disasters of the past. Such an argument ignores the vital historiographical issues embedded within archival narratives about each event. What links theatre fires together as historical events that "set the stage for theatre's history to be told," are the rhetorical tropes used by competing social actors to construct meaning in a disrupted social context, and how those

tropes were already embedded within, and contributed to, the society in which the disaster process occurred.

Theatre is a particularly useful medium through which to consider these new sources of evidence for the way the field suggests methods of transmitting knowledge that exist beyond the boundaries of the archive. By studying these transmissions of knowledge that resist typical archival strategies, the focus on disaster shifts from what is destroyed, to what is created, to what rises from the ashes. Another useful facet of theatre as a medium for considering post-disaster paradigmatic cultural production is theatre's inherent constructedness, and how that constructedness destabilizes ideas of essential narratives of memory. Theatre as construct provides a productive insight because it points to the fact that archives and records abide by a similar constructedness. In undertaking this research, and writing this dissertation, my goal has been to demonstrate how narrational and rhetorical themes and tropes that were used in the post-disaster paradigm of these three major American theatre fires to construct, validate, and organize social memory, historical records, and disaster archives were already embedded within the societies that became sites of disaster events.

Less important, then, are the generalizable conclusions an historian can draw about the relationship between the ephemerality of theatrical practice and the writing of history. What becomes more important is what patterns emerge through research and analysis of the competing processes and agenda of memory work undertaken at the elite and grass-roots levels. That there are similarities between these events, when understood through the rubric of disaster sociology, does not suggest, as MacKaye argues, some sort of causal and historical linkage between them, but a linkage of metatheatrical tools that utilize the "inherent constructedness" of the disastrous/theatrical space to participate in a sociologically necessary performance of post-

disaster re-construction and re-stabilization. Disaster, then, not as — or not *only* as — setting the stage for theatre's history to be told, but as, first, a process through which theatre, communities, and societies becomes themselves and, next, as a paradigm in which identity is disrupted, contested, negotiated, and re-constructed anew.

End Notes

Introduction: Theatre History Through Conflagration

¹ This inscription comes from the preface to Samuel Henry Prince's influential dissertation, *Catastrophe and Social Change*.

² Gerhard, William Paul. *Theatre Fires and Panics: Their Causes and Preventions* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1896), 8.

³ Ellen MacKay, "The Theatre as a Self-Consuming Art," *Theatre Survey* 49, no. 01 (2008): 92.
⁴ 93.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ 94.

⁷ 102.

⁸ 92.

⁹ 94-5.

¹⁰ 94. MacKay's articles specifically notes that "other evidences gathered under different rubrics will doubtless yield other maxims."

¹¹ 95.

¹² Bos, Celesta Kofman, Susann Ullberg, and Paul 't Hart, "The Long Shadow of Disaster: Memory and Politics in Holland and Sweden," *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 23, no. 1 (2005).

¹³ Long, Beverly, Mary Strine, and Mary Francis Hopkins, "Research in Interpretation and Performance Studies: Trends, Issues, Priorities," in *Speech Communications: Essays to Commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the Speech Communication Associations*, ed. G.M. Phillips and J.T. Woods (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 190. This concept builds specifically upon the work of W.B. Gallie.

¹⁴ Perry, Ronald W, "What Is a Disaster?," in *Handbook of Disaster Research*, ed. Enrico L. Quarantelli and Russel R. Dynes Havidan Rodriguez, Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research (Newark: Springer, 2007), 3.

¹⁵ Carr, L. J., "Disaster and the Sequence-Pattern of Social Change," *American Journal of Sociology* 38 (1932).

¹⁶ Wallace, Anthony F.C., "Human Behavior in Extreme Situations," (Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences - National Research Council, 1956). Ebook. 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Perry, "What Is a Disaster?," 6.

¹⁹ Killian, Lewis, qtd in Perry, "What Is a Disaster?" 15.

²⁰ Webb, Gary R., "The Popular Culture of Disaster: Exploring a New Dimension of Disaster Research," in *Handbook of Disaster Research*, ed. Enrico L. Quarantelli and Russel R. Dynes Havidan Rodriguez, Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research (Newark: Springer, 2007), 437.

²¹ 12.

²² 12-13.

²³ Knowles, Scott G., *The Disaster Experts: Mastering Risk in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 5.

²⁴ 10.

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- ²⁵ 15.
- ²⁶ Scanlon, T. Joseph, "Rewriting a Living Legend: Researching the 1917 Halifax Explosion," *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 15, no. 1 (1997).
- ²⁷ 148.
- ²⁸ The terms elite and grass-roots come from Bos, Ullberg, and 't Hart, "The Long Shadow of Disaster: Memory and Politics in Holland and Sweden," (2005). 23.
- ²⁹ Scanlon, "Rewriting a Living Legend: Researching the 1917 Halifax Explosion," 149.
- ³⁰ 152.
- ³¹ Eyre, Anne "Remembering: Community Commemoration after Disaster," in *Handbook of Disaster Research*, ed. Enrico L. Quarantelli and Russel R. Dynes Havidan Rodriguez, *Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research* (Newark: Springer, 2007), 442.
- ³² 455.
- ³³ Bos, Ullberg and 't Hart, "The Long Shadow of Disaster: Memory and Politics in Holland and Sweden," 5.
- ³⁴ 6.
- ³⁵ 8.
- ³⁶ *Ibid*
- ³⁷ Scanlon, "Rewriting a Living Legend: Researching the 1917 Halifax Explosion," 154.
- ³⁸ 169.
- ³⁹ Postlewait, Thomas, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 1.
- ⁴⁰ 224.
- ⁴¹ Schechner, Richard, *Performance Theory*, 2nd, rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003).
- ⁴² Roach, Joseph R., *Cities of the Dead* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 2.
- ⁴³ 184.
- ⁴⁴ Carlson, Marvin, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 142.
- ⁴⁵ 7.
- ⁴⁶ Taylor, Diana, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), xvi.
- ⁴⁷ 16.
- ⁴⁸ Nora, Pierre, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Memoire," *Representations* 25 (1989).
- ⁴⁹ 8.
- ⁵⁰ 8-9.
- ⁵¹ Ricoeur, Paul, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 137.
- ⁵² 185.
- ⁵³ 365-66.
- ⁵⁴ Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Memoire," 7.
- ⁵⁵ 8.
- ⁵⁶ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 365-66.
- ⁵⁷ Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print. 147.

⁵⁸ Stallings, Robert A., "Methodological Issues," in *Handbook of Disaster Research*, ed. Enrico L. Quarantelli and Russel R. Dynes Havidan Rodriguez, Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research (Newark: Springer, 2007), 64.

⁵⁹ Scanlon, "Rewriting a Living Legend: Researching the 1917 Halifax Explosion," 171.

⁶⁰ Eyre, "Remembering: Community Commemoration after Disaster," 442.

⁶¹ 454.

⁶² Webb, "The Popular Culture of Disaster: Exploring a New Dimension of Disaster Research," 434.

Part I – Richmond, 1811

¹ Bradsby, Perrin, *The History of Alexander, Union, and Pulaski Counties, Illinois* (Chicago: O.L. Haskin & Co. Historical Publishers, 1883).

² "Lexington (Ken.) Decem. 17," *Pittsburgh Gazette* 1811.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Griff, "The Ralph Leland Goodrich Diaries, 1859-1867," Wordpress, <http://goodrichpoems.wordpress.com/1860-2/july-1860/ex-governor-thomas-browns-memory-of-the-1811-richmond-fire/>.

⁵ Adams, Herbert B., "The United States Academy at Richmond," *Circular of Information* 1 (1888): 22.

⁶ Highfill, Philip H., Kalman Burnim, and Edward A. Langhans, "Biographical Dictionary of Actors & Actresses, 1660-1800," (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993).

⁷ Sherman, Susanne K. "Thomas Wade West, Theatrical Impressario, 1790-1799," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 9, no. 1 (1952): 26.

⁸ Mordecai, Samuel, *Richmond in by-Gone Days, Being Reminiscences of an Old Citizen* (Richmond: George M. West, 1856), 141. No one died in this event.

⁹ Highfill, Burnim and Langhans, "Biographical Dictionary of Actors & Actresses, 1660-1800," 376. Some sources suggest the fire that West "saw" was early morning sunlight streaming through the window.

¹⁰ Munford, George Wythe, *The Two Parsons; Cupid's Sports; the Dream; and the Jewels of Virginia*, (Richmond: JDK Sleight, 1884). 436.

¹¹ O'Lynch, John, "A Collection of Facts and Statements, Relative to the Fatal Event, Which Occured at the Theatre, in Richmond, on the 26th December, 1811," in *The Capital and the Bay: Narratives of Washington and the Chesapeake Bay Region, ca. 1600-1925* (Richmond: John O'Lynch, 1812), 25.

¹² Watson, John, "Calamity at Richmond," *ibid.* (Philadelphia: Shaw&Shoemaker), 38.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Mordecai, *Richmond in by-Gone Days, Being Reminiscences of an Old Citizen*, 141.

¹⁵ Watson, "Calamity at Richmond," 37.

¹⁶ Scanlon, "Rewriting a Living Legend: Researching the 1917 Halifax Explosion," 171.

¹⁷ Mordecai, *Richmond in by-Gone Days, Being Reminiscences of an Old Citizen*, 203.

¹⁸ Shepherd, Samuel, *The Statues of Large of Virginia, from October Session 1792, to December Session 1806, Inclusive, in Three Volumes*, vol. III (Richmond: Samuel Shepherd, 1836), 335.

Note that McClurg was the uncle by marriage of James McCaw, who gained fame on the night of the Richmond fire by lowering women out of the window.

¹⁹ Watson, "Calamity at Richmond," 37.

²⁰ "For the Enquirer," *Richmond Enquirer*, 21 January 1812; Thornton, Caroline Homassel, "The Authobiography of Mrs. Caroline Homassel Thorton (1795-1875)," *Papers of the Albemarle County Historical Society* 1945-1946.

²¹ Bos, Ullberg and 't Hart, "The Long Shadow of Disaster: Memory and Poilitics in Holland and Sweden," 22.

²² Thornton, "The Authobiography of Mrs. Caroline Homassel Thorton (1795-1875).", 22

²³ Many sources list Conyers as the blood niece of Mary Magee Gallego, but there doesn't seem to be any evidence whatsoever that this is an actual blood relationship, given that Mary Magee is known to have had only one sibling - Sarah Magee, who married John Augustus Chevallie. Also of note, Conyers is sometimes mistakenly spelled as Congers. Confers is the accepted spelling of her name.

²⁴ Lt. James Gibbon was described, in William Ray's seminal account of the capture of the crew of the USS Philadelphia, *Horrors of Slavery: OR, The American Tars in Tripoli*, as a "young gentleman of merit."

²⁵ *Virginia Patriot*, 1811, qtd. In Martin Staples Shockley, "The Richmond Stage 1784-1812," (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977), 352-53. The authorship of this effusion is anonymous, but it's extremely likely Girardin or Placide wrote this. Reasons for this assumption are that the writer was obviously extremely well educated, articulate, and versed in French language, politics and literary theory. Girardin and Placide are both candidates that fit that bill, and who would have had a vested interest in generating good will for the performance. Note the use of "eulogium"; in retrospect, given its connotations with death, a grim term to use.

²⁶ Munford, *The Two Parsons; Cupid's Sports; the Dream; and the Jewels of Virginia*. 438.

²⁷ It's unclear if this is Eliza Placide performing again. Possibly not, as Eliza is billed as "Miss E Placide" and the player of the hornpipe is billed as "Miss Placide." Jane Placide, who would have been seven at the time of the fire, was also known to perform with the company, although I suspect this was most likely Caroline, who, at 22, is more likely to have been performing outside of the "ballet for children" advertised the month previous. Shockley, "The Richmond Stage 1784-1812.", 347

²⁸ There's another historical coincidence here: the song's original performance was at Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, a building that couldn't seem to *not* burn down; the second, of course, is that the title, "False Alarms," holds some grimness when one considers the cries that went out in the initial moments of the Richmond fire.

²⁹ Munford, *The Two Parsons; Cupid's Sports; the Dream; and the Jewels of Virginia*. 439.

³⁰ Webb, "The Popular Culture of Disaster: Exploring a New Dimension of Disaster Research."

³¹ 434.

³² Grosette, H.W., *Raymond and Agnes, or the Bleeding Nun of Lindenburg* (London: Thomas Hailes Lacy), 9.

³³ 9-10.

³⁴ 12.

³⁵ In the novel, as well as in Grosette's play, Ursula is Agnes' duenna, a governess in charge of her life. No such character is billed in the Placide and Green version of the script, but her counterpart is probably Marianna, a fellow nun in the novel, who was played by Miss Thomas. Conrad makes no billed appearance in the Placide and Green versions of the play.

³⁶ Grosette, *Raymond and Agnes, or the Bleeding Nun of Lindenburg*, 13.

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- ³⁷ Munford, *The Two Parsons; Cupid's Sports; the Dream; and the Jewels of Virginia*. 439.
- ³⁸ Watson, "Calamity at Richmond," 33.
- ³⁹ Grosette, *Raymond and Agnes, or the Bleeding Nun of Lindenburg*.
- ⁴⁰ Watson, "Calamity at Richmond," 33; Grosette, *Raymond and Agnes, or the Bleeding Nun of Lindenburg*, 12.
- ⁴¹ Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*, 7.
- ⁴² Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Memoire," 8.
- ⁴³ Webb, "The Popular Culture of Disaster: Exploring a New Dimension of Disaster Research."; Eyre, "Remembering: Community Commemoration after Disaster."
- ⁴⁴ Watson, "Calamity at Richmond," 27.
- ⁴⁵ 34.
- ⁴⁶ 33.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁸ 34.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁵¹ 35.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*
- ⁵³ 36; 35.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁵ 51.
- ⁵⁶ 49.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁰ 50.
- ⁶¹ 51.
- ⁶² 52.
- ⁶³ The crash was most likely the stairs collapsing.
- ⁶⁴ The Mayos were another prominent Richmond family, and today mark the city with their name appended to a bridge over the James River.
- ⁶⁵ Barrett, Philip, *Gilbert Hunt, the City Blacksmith* (Richmond: James Woodhouse & Co., 1859), 27.
- ⁶⁶ Potter, MD, William Warren, "Thumbnail Skethces," *The American Medical Quarterly: A Magazine of the Medicine Today, Vol I, June 1899 to April 1900*, 91.
- ⁶⁷ Watson, "Calamity at Richmond," 18.
- ⁶⁸ Harrison County is now a part of West Virginia. J. G. Jackson is a name of some note in early American politics. Brother-in-law to Dolly Madison through his first marriage, Jackson ultimately served as a Judge in the US District Court until his death.
- ⁶⁹ Watson, "Calamity at Richmond," 47.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁷¹ Watson, "Calamity at Richmond," 48.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁴ Whoever this woman was, it was not Mary Scott, who is listed as a victim of the fire.

⁷⁵ Watson, "Calamity at Richmond," 29.

⁷⁶ Although he shares his name with his father, for the sake of simplicity, I'll refer, from here on out, to Lt. Gibbon, Jr. simply by "Gibbon".

⁷⁷ Thornton, "The Authobiography of Mrs. Caroline Homassel Thorton (1795-1875)," 35.

⁷⁸ Watson, "Calamity at Richmond," 51.

⁷⁹ "Two Lovers Perished in the Burning of the Richmond Theatre." *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 1937. This is almost certainly a misspelling of "Minigerrode", a name based on the spelling found in correspondences in the Valentine History Center in Richmond, VA, and the name of a fairly famous Richmond family. In 1843, the patriarch of the family, Charles Minnigerode, a professor and minister, married Mary Carter. This would have been Mary Gibbon's daughter, Mary Carter. Mary Gibbon Carter and Minnegerode had eight children, and this is where the diary entered the Minnegerode family line.

⁸⁰ Weiss, Susan Archer, "Richmond Romance," in *The Richmond Dispatch* (Richmond: James A. Cowardin and William H. Davis).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *The American Almanac and Repository of Useful Knowledge, for the Year 1835*, ed. Charles Bowen (Boston: Charles Folsom, 1834); *The American Almanac and Repository of Useful Knowledge, for the Year 1836*, ed. Charles Bowen (Boston: Charles Folsom, 1835).

⁸⁴ Weiss, "Richmond Romance."

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Gibbon.

⁸⁷ Weiss, "Richmond Romance."

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* It's worth noting that Nellie Reed was reported to have a similar distaste for such practices, and was quoted as saying "it's not nice to know the way you're going to die."

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Crawford, Louisa MacCartney, "We Parted in Silence," in *The World's Best Poetry*, ed. Bliss Carmen (Philadelphia: John D. Morris & Co.).

⁹⁷ Weiss, "Richmond Romance."

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ "For the Enquirer." *Richmond Enquirer*, 21 January 1812.

¹⁰¹ Weiss, "Richmond Romance."

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Muir, James. "Repentance; or, Richmond in Tears." In *The Capital and the Bay: Narratives of Washington and the Chesapeake Bay Region, ca. 1600-1925*. Alexandria, 1812.

¹⁰⁶ Little, John Peyton. *History of Richmond*. Richmond: Dietz Printing Company, 1933. South Literary Messenger.

While Little, who was born five years after the fire, does not cite his source for knowing how Gibbon lost his arm, it is worth noting that this is easily explained by his interested in history, and his association with the medical community in Richmond.

¹⁰⁷ Stolley, Kathy S. "Urban Legends." In *The Basics of Sociology*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005.

¹⁰⁸ Roach, *Cities of the Dead*. 2.

¹⁰⁹ Bos, "The Long Shadow of Disaster: Memory and Poilitics in Holland and Sweden." 6.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Bos, "The Long Shadow of Disaster: Memory and Poilitics in Holland and Sweden." 9.

¹¹² Scanlon, "Rewriting a Living Legend: Researching the 1917 Halifax Explosion," 154.

¹¹³ Bos, "The Long Shadow of Disaster: Memory and Poilitics in Holland and Sweden," 7.

¹¹⁴ Watson, "Calamity at Richmond," 8.

¹¹⁵ Webb, "The Popular Culture of Disaster: Exploring a New Dimension of Disaster Research." 430.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Munford, *The Two Parsons; Cupid's Sports; the Dream; and the Jewels of Virginia*. 447-48.

¹¹⁸ *Particular Account of the Dreadful Fire at Richmond, Virginia*, (Baltimore: B.W. Bower & co., 1812), 13.

¹¹⁹ Watson, "Calamity at Richmond," 15.

¹²⁰ 17.

¹²¹ *Particular Account of the Dreadful Fire at Richmond, Virginia*, 13.

¹²² Spangler, Jewell, "American Mourning: Catastrophe, Public Grief, and the Making of Civic Identity in the Early National South," in *Death and the American South*, ed. Craig Thompson and Lorri Glover Friend (New York: Cambridge UP, 2015), 102.

¹²³ Eyre, "Remembering: Community Commemoration after Disaster," 443.

¹²⁴ 442.

¹²⁵ Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 3.

¹²⁶ xi.

¹²⁷ *Particular Account of the Dreadful Fire at Richmond, Virginia*, 12.

¹²⁸ 13.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Particular Account of the Dreadful Fire at Richmond, Virginia*, 14.

¹³¹ 11.

¹³² O'Lynch, "A Collection of Facts and Statements, Relative to the Fatal Event, Which Occured at the Theatre, in Richmond, on the 26th December, 1811," 32.

¹³³ Watson, "Calamity at Richmond," *ibid.* (Philadelphia: Shaw&Shoemaker), 17.

¹³⁴ 49.

¹³⁵ Eyre, "Remembering: Community Commemoration after Disaster," 446.

¹³⁶ Fisher, George D., *History and Reminiscences of the Monumental Church*, Richmond, Va, from 1814 to 1878, (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1880). 14.

¹³⁷ Watson, "Calamity at Richmond," 37-38. Italics appear as printed.

¹³⁸ 41.

¹³⁹ 42.

- ¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.* The identity of the Mrs. Patterson desired as picked up at Edward Trent's house must be Elizabeth, although it is worth noting that there was a second Patterson, Nancy, who is listed as a victim of the fire. Nancy Patterson was a woman of color, and it seems difficult to believe that Richmond, built on the backs of the slave economy, would have allowed her body to lead the procession.
- ¹⁴¹ Watson, "Calamity at Richmond," 42.
- ¹⁴² *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴³ Barish, Jonas A., *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 299.
- ¹⁴⁴ Watson, "Calamity at Richmond," 41.
- ¹⁴⁵ O'Lynch, "A Collection of Facts and Statements, Relative to the Fatal Event, Which Occurred at the Theatre, in Richmond, on the 26th December, 1811," 34.
- ¹⁴⁶ Spangler, "American Mourning: Catastrophe, Public Grief, and the Making of Civic Identity in the Early National South," 109.
- ¹⁴⁷ Muir, "Repentance; or, Richmond in Tears," 65.
- ¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴⁹ Alexander, Ann, "Remarks on the Theatre, and on the Late Fire at Richmond, in Virginia," in *The Capital and the Bay: Narratives of Washington and the Chesapeake Bay Region, ca. 1600-1925* (York: T. Wilson and Son, 1812), 6.
- ¹⁵⁰ 6-7.
- ¹⁵¹ 9.
- ¹⁵² Alexander, Archibald, "A Discourse Occasioned by the Burning of the Theatre in the City of Richmond, Virginia, on the Twenty-Sixth of December, 1811. By Which Lawful Calamity a Large Number of Lives Were Lost. Delivered in the Third Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, on the Eighth Day of January, 1812, at the Request of Virginia Students Attached to the Medical Class in the University of Pennsylvania," *ibid.* (Philadelphia: John Weldwood Scott), 8.
- ¹⁵³ *Particular Account of the Dreadful Fire at Richmond, Virginia*, 31.
- ¹⁵⁴ 34.
- ¹⁵⁵ 35.
- ¹⁵⁶ Hill, William, "A Sermon, Delivered in the Presbyterian Meeting-House in Winchester, on Thursday the 23rd Jan. 1812; Being a Day of Fasting and Humiliation, Appointed by the Citizens of Winchester on Account of the Late Calamitous Fire at the Richmond Theatre.," in *The Capital and the Bay: Narratives of Washington and the Chesapeake Bay Region, ca. 1600-1925* (Winchester: Winchester Gazette, 1812), 3.
- ¹⁵⁷ 8.
- ¹⁵⁸ 7. Hill, apparently, had little understanding of Greek and Roman theatrical practices.
- ¹⁵⁹ *Particular Account of the Dreadful Fire at Richmond, Virginia*, 30.
- ¹⁶⁰ Fisher, *History and Reminiscences of the Monumental Church, Richmond, Va, from 1814 to 1878*. 18.
- ¹⁶¹ Spangler, "American Mourning: Catastrophe, Public Grief, and the Making of Civic Identity in the Early National South," 109.
- ¹⁶² Fisher, *History and Reminiscences of the Monumental Church, Richmond, VA, from 1814 to 1878*. 20.
- ¹⁶³ Latrobe, it is worth reminding, was the designer of the rejected Richmond Theatre.

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- ¹⁶⁴ Fisher, *History and Reminiscences of the Monumental Church, Richmond, VA, from 1814 to 1878*. 26.
- ¹⁶⁵ 30.
- ¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶⁷ Eyre, "Remembering: Community Commemoration after Disaster," 452.
- ¹⁶⁸ 454.
- ¹⁶⁹ Webb, "The Popular Culture of Disaster: Exploring a New Dimension of Disaster Research," 437.
- ¹⁷⁰ Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, 299.
- ¹⁷¹ Watson, "Calamity at Richmond," 50.
- ¹⁷² Webb, "The Popular Culture of Disaster: Exploring a New Dimension of Disaster Research," 437.
- ¹⁷³ Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, 299.
- ¹⁷⁴ Arthur Hornblow, "The Lessons of the Chicago Fire," *The Theatre: Illustrated Monthly Magazine of Theatrical and Musical Life*, 1904, 37.
- ¹⁷⁵ Webb, "The Popular Culture of Disaster: Exploring a New Dimension of Disaster Research," 437.

Part II – Brooklyn, 1876

- ¹ Knowles, *The Disaster Experts: Mastering Risk in Modern America*, 13-14.
- ² The links between this panic and the 2008 U.S.A. housing bubble crisis are worth a mention.
- ³ Hayes took the Presidency, while Tilden ensured the removal of federal troops from the former Confederate States.
- ⁴ "Amusements: Brooklyn Theatre," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 27 November 1876.
- ⁵ Knowles, *The Disaster Experts: Mastering Risk in Modern America*, 5.
- ⁶ Roorbach, Jr., O.A., *Actors as They Are: A Series of Sketches of the Most Eminent Performers Now on Stage*. New York: O.A. Roorbach, Jr., 1856.
- ⁷ Winter, William. "Frederick B. Conway." *Dunlap Society: Brief Chronicles, Part I*, no. 52 (1889).
- ⁸ Brown, Thomas Allston, *A History of the New York Stage from the First Performance in 1731 to 1901*, vol. I (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1903), 384.
- ⁹ "Death of Mrs. F.B. Conway Last Night," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 29 April 1875.
- ¹⁰ Beck, Ulrich, Wolfgang Bonss, and Christoph Lau, "The Theory of Reflexive Modernization: Problematic, Hypotheses and Research Programme," *Theory, Culture & Society* 20, no. 2 (2003): 1.
- ¹¹ DeValle, Cezar, *The Brooklyn Theatre Index*, vol. II (New York: Theatre Talks, 2010), 211.
- ¹² "Legal and Other Troubles at the Brooklyn Theatre," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 6 July 1875 1875.
- ¹³ "The New Managers of the Brooklyn Theatre," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 24 August 1875 1875.
- ¹⁴ "The Brooklyn Fire," *New - York Tribune (1866-1899)*, 1876 Dec 20 1876.
- ¹⁵ Keady, Patrick, *The Fire in the Brooklyn Theatre: Special Report of the Fire Marshal* (Brooklyn: Daily Times Print, 1876), 23.
- ¹⁶ 6.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Knowles, *The Disaster Experts: Mastering Risk in Modern America*, 22.

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- ¹⁹ Sellnow, Timothy L. and Matthew Seeger, "Exploring the Boundaries of Crisis Communication: The Case of the 1997 Red River Valley Flood," *Communication Studies* 52, no. 2 (2001): 165.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ Carlin, Phyllis Scott, and Linda M. Park-Fuller, "Disaster Narrative Emergent/Cies: Performing Loss, Identity and Resistance," *Text & Performance Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2012): 21-24.
- ²² "The Worst of Calamities," *New York Tribune (1866-1899)*, 1876 Dec 07 1876.
- ²³ "The Brooklyn Fire."
- ²⁴ Murodch's last name is alternately spelled Murdoch and Murdock. For the sake of consistency, I use Murdoch.
- ²⁵ Harrison claims Murdoch told her he had pleurisy; *Thrilling Personal Experience* claims it was sciatica.
- ²⁶ "Brooklyn Theatre," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 6 September 1871.
- ²⁷ The name is spelled in various ways depending on the source. The *New York Times* reports his name as Thomas Cumberson, but it's extremely likely this is either a mistake or a misattribution; the Official report of Fire Marshall Patrick Keady features, instead, an interview with John Cummerson. Both sources list the same address for the man, indicating the incorrect nature of at least one spelling. Because of the official nature of Keady's report, I defer to his spelling of the name. It's possible that the *Times* reporter misheard, and thus misreported, Cummerson's name, upon his interview in the hospital, owing to the difficulty Cummerson had speaking because of the smoke inhalation.
- ²⁸ "The Worst of Calamities," 59.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ Knowles, *The Disaster Experts: Mastering Risk in Modern America*, 79.
- ³¹ Horton, William, *Driftwood of the Stage* (Detroit: Winn & Hammond, 1904), 329.
- ³² Jackson, N. Hart, *The Two Orphans* (1875), 55.
- ³³ "Brooklyn's Great Fire," *New - York Tribune (1866-1899)*, 19 Dec 1876.
- ³⁴ Keady, *The Fire in the Brooklyn Theatre: Special Report of the Fire Marshal*, 18.
- ³⁵ "Miss Kate Claxton's Account of the Fire," *New York Times (1857-1922)*, 6 Dec 1876.
- ³⁶ Jackson, *The Two Orphans*, 55.
- ³⁷ "The Catastrophe," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 6 December 1876 1876.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ Carlin and Park-Fuller, "Disaster Narrative Emergent/Cies: Performing Loss, Identity and Resistance," 21.
- ⁴⁰ "Kate Claxton," *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*, 1876 Dec 09 1876.
- ⁴¹ "The Worst of Calamities."
- ⁴² *Ibid.*
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁴ Keady, *The Fire in the Brooklyn Theatre: Special Report of the Fire Marshal*, 6.
- ⁴⁵ "The Worst of Calamities."
- ⁴⁶ Horton, *Driftwood of the Stage*, 3200.
- ⁴⁷ "The Worst of Calamities."
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁹ "The Theatre Calamity," *New York Times (1857-1922)*, 21 Dec 1876.

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- ⁵⁰ "The Worst of Calamities."
- ⁵¹ "Miss Kate Claxton's Account of the Fire."
- ⁵² *Ibid.*
- ⁵³ Anonymous, *Burning of the Brooklyn Theatre a Thrilling Personal Experience! Brooklyn's Horror. Wholesale Holocaust at the Brooklyn, New York, Theatre, on the Night of December 5th, 1876* (Philadelphia: Barclay & Co., 1877), 42.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁶ "The Worst of Calamities."
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁸ "A Theatre Burned," *New York Times* (1857-1922), 6 Dec 1876.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁰ Anonymous, *Burning of the Brooklyn Theatre a Thrilling Personal Experience! Brooklyn's Horror. Wholesale Holocaust at the Brooklyn, New York, Theatre, on the Night of December 5th, 1876*, 25
- ⁶¹ 30; Horton, *Driftwood of the Stage*, 331.
- ⁶² "How Murdoch and Burroughs Died," *New York Times* (1857-1922), 7 Dec 1876; "The Great Tragedy," *New York Clipper*, 1877.
- ⁶³ Webb, "The Popular Culture of Disaster: Exploring a New Dimension of Disaster Research," 436.
- ⁶⁴ Anonymous, *Burning of the Brooklyn Theatre a Thrilling Personal Experience! Brooklyn's Horror. Wholesale Holocaust at the Brooklyn, New York, Theatre, on the Night of December 5th, 1876*, 25.
- ⁶⁵ "Report of Chief Engineer Nevins," *New York Times* (1857-1922), 16 Dec 1876.
- ⁶⁶ "The Catastrophe."
- ⁶⁷ *Burning of the Brooklyn Theatre a Thrilling Personal Experience! Brooklyn's Horror. Wholesale Holocaust at the Brooklyn, New York, Theatre, on the Night of December 5th, 1876*, 28.
- ⁶⁸ 126.
- ⁶⁹ "The Worst of Calamities."
- ⁷⁰ Bos, Ullberg and 't Hart, "The Long Shadow of Disaster: Memory and Poilitics in Holland and Sweden," 7.
- ⁷¹ "The Worst of Calamities." Probably the Adams Street Market
- ⁷² Eyre, "Remembering: Community Commemoration after Disaster," 442.
- ⁷³ 452.
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid*
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁷ "The Worst of Calamities."
- ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁹ Anonymous, *Burning of the Brooklyn Theatre a Thrilling Personal Experience! Brooklyn's Horror. Wholesale Holocaust at the Brooklyn, New York, Theatre, on the Night of December 5th, 1876*, 27.
- ⁸⁰ Eyre, "Remembering: Community Commemoration after Disaster," 443.
- ⁸¹ 442.

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- ⁸² "The Great Tragedy."
⁸³ *Ibid.*
⁸⁴ *Ibid.*
⁸⁵ "The Generosity of the Stage," *New York Clipper*, 23 December 1876.
⁸⁶ "The New-York Theatrical Benefits," *New York Times (1857-1922)*, 12/22/
22 Dec 1876.
⁸⁷ *Ibid.*
⁸⁸ *Ibid.*
⁸⁹ *Ibid.*
⁹⁰ "The Theatre Calamity."
⁹¹ Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, 6.
⁹² 7.
⁹³ "Secured and Prospective Relief," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 11 1887.
⁹⁴ "The Fire - the Mayor to the Public," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 11 1887.
⁹⁵ *Ibid.*
⁹⁶ Britton, Joshua, "Tragedy, Welfare, and Reform: The Impact of the Brooklyn Theatre Fire of 1876," *Common-Place* 13, no. 4 (2013).
⁹⁷ *Ibid.*
⁹⁸ "The Brooklyn Theatre Fire Fund," *New York Times (1857-1922)*, 28 Mar 28 1879.
⁹⁹ "The Great Tragedy."
¹⁰⁰ "Brooklyn's Heavy Loss," *New York Tribune (1866-1899)*, 1876 Dec 11 1876.
¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*
¹⁰² *Ibid.*
¹⁰³ "The Great Tragedy."
¹⁰⁴ "The Brooklyn Disaster," *New York Times (1857-1922)*, 10 Dec 1876.
¹⁰⁵ The name of the cemetery is spelled variously as Green-Wood and Greenwood in various places. Their official website uses the spelling Green-Wood, which informs my use of it in this dissertation, unless I am quoting a source directly.
¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*
¹⁰⁷ "Brooklyn's Heavy Loss."
¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*
¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*
¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*
¹¹¹ *Ibid.* This is another one of those points whose veracity can be contended, yet which has taken a place in the records of the event as truth. Theodor Kullak was indeed a German musician and composer, and a particularly well regarded one, at that. He never seems to have written a song called *Abendlied*, nor any song which beings "under the greenwood there is peace." Indeed, I can find no references to this line as a lyric in any song aside from those that are repeating the *Tribune's* claim. *Abendlied* translates to "Evening Song," and references not so much the title of a particular work, as a genre of musical creation. There is a thematic satisfaction with the relationship between an "evening song" and the burial of the dead. Whomever the German societies were singing, it most likely wasn't Theodor Kullak.
¹¹² "Brooklyn Theatre Fire (1876)," Green-Wood Cemetery.; "Brooklyn's Heavy Loss."
¹¹³ "Brooklyn's Heavy Loss."
¹¹⁴ "Brooklyn," *New York Times (1857-1922)*, 2 Dec 1879.

¹¹⁵ "Frederick S. Massey, Jacob Worth, William H. Hazzard," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 14 February 1880. Note that while the date of the announcement reads January, the source in which I located it was dated February 5.

¹¹⁶ "Brooklyn," *New York Times (1857-1922)*, 2 Mar 1880.

¹¹⁷ "The Aldermen," *Brooklyn Union-Argus*, 1879. "The Engineer" referenced in the passage may have been Chief Engineer Robert Van Buren, who was referenced earlier in the article.

¹¹⁸ Qtd. in DeValle, *The Brooklyn Theatre Index*, II, 217.

¹¹⁹ "Brooklyn Theatre Fire (1876)".

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² Whittemore, Henry, *Free Masonry in North America from the Colonial Period to the Beginning of the Present Century: Also the History of Masonry in New York from 1730 to 1888: In Connction with the History of the Several Lodges Included in What Is Now Known as the Third Masonic District of Brooklyn* (New York: Artotype Printing and Publishing Co., 1889), 350. Again, this spelling of "Greenwood" is in reference to the spelling in the cited text.

¹²³ Hart, George, "Ra," in *The Routledge Dictionary of Egyptian Gods and Goddesses* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 133.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Hart, "Ra," 134.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Weisse, John A., *The Obelisk and Freemasonry According to the Discoveries of Belzoni and Commander Gorringer, Also Egyptian Symbols Compared with Those Discovered in American Mounds* (New York: J.W. Bouton, 1880), 7.

¹²⁸ Hart, "Ra," 48.

¹²⁹ Weisse, *The Obelisk and Freemasonry According to the Discoveries of Belzoni and Commander Gorringer, Also Egyptian Symbols Compared with Those Discovered in American Mounds*, 47.

¹³⁰ Eyre, "Remembering: Community Commemoration after Disaster," 454.

¹³¹ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 365.

¹³² "Brooklyn's Heavy Loss." It may be worth noting that the Brooklyn Academy of Music, itself, burned down in late November of 1903 just hours before a banquet was to have taken place there. There were no deaths. A fault in the electrical wiring was identified as the cause.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* The great German, incidentally, is Johann Paul Friedrich Richter, who was otherwise known as Jean Paul.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ It may be worth noting that Hooley was no stranger to fires destroying theatre buildings, as his own original theatrical house in Chicago was destroyed during the 1871 Great Chicago fire.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 365.

¹⁴¹ "Brooklyn's Heavy Loss."

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

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- ¹⁴⁴ "Death in the Theatre," *New York Clipper* 1876.
- ¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴⁶ "The Generosity of the Stage."
- ¹⁴⁷ "The Gospel of Works and the Gospel of Words," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 9 1887.
- ¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴⁹ Bos, Ullberg and 't Hart, "The Long Shadow of Disaster: Memory and Poilitics in Holland and Sweden," 6.
- ¹⁵⁰ Scanlon, "Rewriting a Living Legend: Researching the 1917 Halifax Explosion," 15.
- ¹⁵¹ MacKaye, Percy, *Epoch: The Life of Steele Mackaye, Genius of the Theatre*, vol. I (New York: Boni & Liveriight, 1927), 254.
- ¹⁵² *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵³ "The Catastrophe."
- ¹⁵⁴ MacKaye, *Epoch: The Life of Steele Mackaye, Genius of the Theatre*, vol. I, 254.
- ¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵⁷ Sokalski, J.A., *Pictorial Illusionism: The Theatre of Steele Mackaye* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 123; Richard A. Mangrum, "Steele Mackaye: Inventor-Innovator" (University of North Texas, 1970), 43.
- ¹⁵⁸ Sokalski, *Pictorial Illusionism: The Theatre of Steele Mackaye*, 123.
- ¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶⁰ MacKaye, Steele, "Safety in Theaters," in *The North American Review* (Cedar Falls: University of Northern Iowa, 1882), 462.
- ¹⁶¹ 463.
- ¹⁶² *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶⁴ MacKaye, "Safety in Theaters," 464.
- ¹⁶⁵ "The Brooklyn Fire."
- ¹⁶⁶ "Safety in Theaters," 469.
- ¹⁶⁷ Mangrum, "Steele Mackaye: Inventor-Innovator," 52.
- ¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶⁹ MacKaye, "Safety in Theaters," 464.
- ¹⁷⁰ "Theatre-Panics," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), 30 Dec 1876.
- ¹⁷¹ Curry, J. K. "Kate Claxton, Fire Jinx: The Aftermath of the Brooklyn Theatre Fire," *Performance Research* 18, no. 1 (2013): 64.
- ¹⁷² Spencer H. Cone, *The Life of Spencer H. Cone* (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman & Company, 1857), 47.
- ¹⁷³ "The Catastrophe."
- ¹⁷⁴ "Kate Claxton."
- ¹⁷⁵ "Miss Kate Claxton's Account of the Fire."
- ¹⁷⁶ These are probably simple rumors, or otherwise were invented by newspapermen eager for an interesting story. Too many accounts corroborate Claxton's presence in and around the precinct house and the hotel.
- ¹⁷⁷ "Miss Kate Claxton's Account of the Fire."
- ¹⁷⁸ "Miss Kate Claxton Recalls the Fearful Experiences of That Fateful Night," *New York Times*, 1885.

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- ¹⁷⁹ "Panics in Theaters," *New York Tribune* (1866-1899), 26 Dec 1876. The Curry article says this happened on December 30th. It did not. Curry is identifying the date of the republication of the article from the *New York Tribune* in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*. Both sources, though, list the performance date as Christmas.
- ¹⁸⁰ "Theatre-Panics."
- ¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸² Curry, "Kate Claxton, Fire Jinx: The Aftermath of the Brooklyn Theatre Fire."
- ¹⁸³ "Personal," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), 4 May 1877. My thanks to JK Curry's article "Kate Claxton: Fire Jinx" for pointing me to this source.
- ¹⁸⁴ "Kate Claxton, Fire Jinx: The Aftermath of the Brooklyn Theatre Fire," 66.
- ¹⁸⁵ Again, my thanks to Curry.
- ¹⁸⁶ Qtd. in {Curry, 2013 #9@66}
- ¹⁸⁷ McVicker, J. H., "The "Can-Can's" Sensation," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), 17 Feb 1875. So called because they "can-can" print anything they please.
- ¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.* Self-consciously presented as another hoax, this story appeared in the *Tribune* suggesting that, even if it hadn't *actually* happened, it *could* have.
- ¹⁸⁹ "The Theatres," 14 Apr 1877.
- ¹⁹⁰ "Finds Abuse of Building Laws," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), 30 May 1903.
- ¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹² *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹³ "Must Get Fire Escapes," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), 2 Oct 1903.
- ¹⁹⁴ "New Yorkers Give Their Views," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), 31 Dec 1903.

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- ¹ Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, 349.
- ² 348.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ 349.
- ⁵ Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 2.
- ⁶ Dryden, Wilma J., "Ironic Prologue and Epilogue to the Iroquois Fire," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 54, no. 2 (1968): 147.
- ⁷ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 82.
- ⁸ "The Chicago Theatre Fire," *New York Times* (1857-1922), 01 Jan 1904.
- ⁹ "Soon Will Fix Blame for Fire," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), 18 Jan 1904.
- ¹⁰ Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, 350.
- ¹¹ Dryden, "Ironic Prologue and Epilogue to the Iroquois Fire," 153.
- ¹² Knowles, *The Disaster Experts: Mastering Risk in Modern America*, 79.
- ¹³ Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Memoire," 7.
- ¹⁴ "Theater One of the Finest," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), 31 Dec 1903; Edward Freiburger, "From Sauganahsh to Iroquois," in *Iroquois Theatre Souvenir Program*, ed. Thomas J. Noonan (Chicago: Rand, McNally & Co., 1903), 93.
- ¹⁵ "Buying Site of Treater," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), 27 Jun 1903; "Notable Deals of the Week," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), 28 Jun 1903. These men still owned the theatre when it was sold, post-fire, to Attorney Levy Mayer.

¹⁶ Special to The New York Times, "Chicago's New Theatres," *New York Times (1857-1922)*, 11 Apr 1902.

¹⁷ "Chicago's New Theatre," *New York Times (1857-1922)*, 29 Jul 1903.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Collins, Arthur and Jay Hickory Wood, *Blue Beard: Or, the Curse of Curiosity* (London: Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, 1901), 6.

²⁰ John J. McNally (sometimes called J. J.) is something of a mystery in the history of American theatre. He was incredibly prolific as a playwright between 1895 and about 1910, writing original plays, musicals, and adaptations. Despite his prolific nature, he's little more than a footnote in American theatre history.

²¹ "Mr. Blue Beard on Broadway," *The New York Times*, 22 January 1903.

²² See Chapter 10 from "Eddie Foy: a biography of the early popular stage comedian"

²³ "Mr. Blue Beard a Scenic Production," *The Washington Post (1877-1922)*, 31 Dec 1903; Knowles, *The Disaster Experts: Mastering Risk in Modern America*, 80.

²⁴ Holland, Frank, "The Show Business and Show Folks," *The Rotarian*, 1924, 55. The Grigolatis' had appeared in Klaw & Erlanger's previous productions, including *Sleeping Beauty and the Beast* and the 1901 Drury Lane production of *Mr. Bluebeard*. There's quite a bit of mystery surrounding the Grigolatis troupe.

²⁵ Miss Clipper, "Miss Clipper's Anecdotes, Personalities and Comments Concerning Stage Folk and Sometimes Others," *New York Clipper*, 7 February 1903.

²⁶ *Ibid.* I include these tales with some level of skepticism, as there is no other evidence to confirm or deny either of these. Foy's autobiography mentions neither incident, but this, ultimately, proves nothing. Danger was an inherent part of the theatrical enterprise in the early 20th century, as theaters began to expand and utilize more and more special effects, so it's possible Foy felt these didn't merit inclusion into his life's narrative. Neither does the *Clipper* provide any reference or support for either of these claims, aside from attributing these stories to "Miss Clipper" herself, composer and sometime journalist Josephine Gro. Armond Fields, a theatre and social historian, evidently believed these stories enough to include them in his 1999 Foy biography. Problematically, no sources on the fire at the Iroquois make mention of a trap door into which Ophelia descends in a blaze of fire, and it seems likely to me that such a special effect would have merited, at the very least, a mention. It seems equally unlikely to me that there would be a practical fire effect onstage with enough heat to light Foy and his costume on fire. I include these stories less because I can confirm their historical veracity and more because I feel they lend credence to the idea that danger was always lurking just beyond the corner. That the Iroquois went up in flames was no mistake, nor was it entirely fate. Performance was dangerous, and if these events occurred, either could easily have taken a bad left turn and resulted in serious injury to Foy, the theatre, his cast mates, or the audience. Instead, these are presented as humorous stories about Foy's quick wit. Perhaps if things hadn't taken that bad left turn at the Iroquois, there would be another story about Foy playing off the danger of the production to an enraptured audience.

²⁷ Foy, Eddie and Alvin F. Harlow, *Clowning through Life* (Boston: EP Dutton and Company, 1928), 276.

²⁸ Brandt, Nat, *Chicago Death Trap: The Iroquois Theatre Fire of 1903* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 4.

²⁹ Post, Louis F., "Fire Inspection in Cleveland," *The Public*, 9 January 1904, 635.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Foy and Harlow, *Clowning through Life*, 276.

³² Hill, Walter K., "Our Chicago Letter," *New York Clipper*, 17 October 1903.

³³ Hill, Walter K., "Our Chicago Letter," *New York Clipper*, 21 November 1903.

³⁴ "Theaters May Lose Licenses," *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*, 31 Oct 1903.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ "Theaters May Lose Licenses."

³⁷ Hill, "Our Chicago Letter."

³⁸ Brandt, *Chicago Death Trap: The Iroquois Theatre Fire of 1903*, 12.

³⁹ Noonan, Thomas, "Iroquois Theatre Souvenir Program," Berkeley Library University of California (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1903), 20.

⁴⁰ 23.

⁴¹ 24.

⁴² 93.

⁴³ Barnette, Jane, "The Matinee Audience in Peril: The Syndicate's "Mr. Bluebeard" and the Iroquois Theatre Fire" (Tuscaloosa, AL, 2012 2012), 24.

⁴⁴ Noonan, "Iroquois Theatre Souvenir Program," 25.

⁴⁵ Hatch, Anthony, *Tinder Box: The Iroquois Theatre Disaster 1903* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2005).

⁴⁶ Noonan, "Iroquois Theatre Souvenir Program," 24.

⁴⁷ 26.

⁴⁸ 29.

⁴⁹ 30; Hatch, *Tinder Box: The Iroquois Theatre Disaster 1903*, 9; "The Theatre a New One," *New York Tribune (1900-1910)*, 31 Dec 1903.

⁵⁰ Noonan, "Iroquois Theatre Souvenir Program," 31-2.

⁵¹ "Curtain Bought Because Cheap," *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*, 2 Jan 1904.

⁵² "Iroquois Theater Opened with "Mr. Blue Beard"; Grand Opera in New York," *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*, 24 Nov 1903. Unless specifically stated otherwise, use of the term *Tribune* in this chapter refers specifically to the *Chicago Tribune*, as opposed to the *New York Tribune*.

⁵³ "House Crowded with People," *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*, 24 Nov 1903.

⁵⁴ "Belasco Declares War," *New York Times (1857-1922)*, 28 Nov 1903. Though I've done much searching, I've been unable to find evidence that either Klaw or Erlanger had ever visited the site of the Iroquois, before or after the fire.

⁵⁵ "Iroquois Theater Opened with "Mr. Blue Beard"; "Grand Opera in New York."

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ "Left to Chance and Shut Exits at the Iroquois," *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*, 7 Jan 1904.

⁵⁸ Webb, "The Popular Culture of Disaster: Exploring a New Dimension of Disaster Research," 434.

⁵⁹ Knowles, *The Disaster Experts: Mastering Risk in Modern America*, 5.

⁶⁰ "Playbills," *Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)*, 31 Dec 1903. Why Klaw and Erlanger intended to move the piece is unclear, especially if the show was still doing a brisk business as the *Tribune* claims.

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- ⁶¹ Elam, Harry J. "The Device of Race: An Introduction," ed. Jr. and David Krasner Harry J. Elam, *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). 4-5.
- ⁶² "Iroquois Theater Opened with 'Mr. Blue Beard'; 'Grand Opera in New York.'"
- ⁶³ McCurdy, D.B., *Lest We Forget: Chicago's Awful Theater Horror* (Chicago: Memorial Publishing Co., 1904), 256.
- ⁶⁴ "Theater Rules Openly Broken," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), 10 Jan 1904.
- ⁶⁵ "Iroquois Curtain Caught on Proscenium Light Board; Structural Defect Gave Chance for Deadly Blast," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), 3 Jan 1904.
- ⁶⁶ "Coroner Hears Firemen's Views," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), 16 Jan 1904.
- ⁶⁷ "Review of Evidence before Coroner's Jury in Inquest on Iroquois Fire Victims," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), 26 Jan 1904.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁹ "Coroner Hears Firemen's Views."
- ⁷⁰ *Lest We Forget: Chicago's Awful Theater Horror*, 306. Dupont claims it was a calcium light that started the fire, but McMullen and most other sources identify the light as a carbon-arc lamp. During the 1890's, carbon-arc lamps replaced most of the calcium lights in theaters. It's possible the light at the Iroquois was a calcium light. Reports by Iroquois staffers give both accounts, and this paper quotes these accounts accurately.
- ⁷¹ 308.
- ⁷² "Review of Evidence before Coroner's Jury in Inquest on Iroquois Fire Victims."
- ⁷³ "Iroquois Curtain Caught on Proscenium Light Board; Structural Defect Gave Chance for Deadly Blast."
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁵ *Lest We Forget: Chicago's Awful Theater Horror*, 105.
- ⁷⁶ Harlow, *Clowning through Life*, 276.
- ⁷⁷ McCurdy, *Lest We Forget: Chicago's Awful Theater Horror*, 106.
- ⁷⁸ "Laws Violated at the Iroquois," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), 2 Jan 1904.
- ⁷⁹ *Lest We Forget: Chicago's Awful Theater Horror*, 308.
- ⁸⁰ 102.
- ⁸¹ "Asbestos Curtain a Failure," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), 31 Dec 1903.
- ⁸² "Find Much for Censure," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), 2 Jan 1904.
- ⁸³ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁵ "Curtain Bought Because Cheap."
- ⁸⁶ McCurdy, *Lest We Forget: Chicago's Awful Theater Horror*, 193.
- ⁸⁷ *Ibid.*; Noonan, "Iroquois Theatre Souvenir Program," 32.
- ⁸⁸ "Coroner Begins Theater Inquest," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), 8 Jan 1904.
- ⁸⁹ Freeman, John R., *On the Safeguarding of Life in Theaters: Being a Study from the Standpoint of an Engineer* (New York: American Society of Mechanical Engineers, 1906), 1.
- ⁹⁰ Qtd. in Knowles, *The Disaster Experts: Mastering Risk in Modern America*, 82.
- ⁹¹ Noonan, "Iroquois Theatre Souvenir Program," 7.
- ⁹² McCurdy, *Lest We Forget: Chicago's Awful Theater Horror*, 78.
- ⁹³ 102; 78.
- ⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

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- ⁹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁹⁷ "An Heroic Elevator Boy," *The Friend: A Religious and Literary Journal* LXXVII, no. 46 (1904): 362.
- ⁹⁸ "Iroquois Fire Tragedy Lives in Actor's Memory," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1923-1963), 30 Dec 1926.
- ⁹⁹ "An Heroic Elevator Boy."
- ¹⁰⁰ *Lest We Forget: Chicago's Awful Theater Horror*, 99. Likely, these were stage employees at the Iroquois; William Price is the only one of this group credited in the program. He was a properties man.
- ¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰² *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰³ McCurdy, *Lest We Forget: Chicago's Awful Theater Horror*, 101.
- ¹⁰⁴ Bos, Ullberg, and 't Hart, "The Long Shadow of Disaster: Memory and Poilitics in Holland and Sweden," 6.
- ¹⁰⁵ "571 Dead Bodies Found in Ruins," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), 31 Dec 1903.
- ¹⁰⁶ McCurdy, *Lest We Forget: Chicago's Awful Theater Horror*, 35.
- ¹⁰⁷ Harlow, *Clowning through Life*, 283.
- ¹⁰⁸ Hatch, *Tinder Box: The Iroquois Theatre Disaster 1903*, 91. Notably, the switchboard's location on the stage was in violation of the city's building and electrical codes.
- ¹⁰⁹ "Arrest 12 Men for Fire Horror at the Iroquois," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), 1 Jan 1904.
- ¹¹⁰ A January 3, 1904 *Tribune* article vaguely implies the employee is named Frank Barr: "An effort was made to close the doors but the chorus girls made a mad dash for the exit and crowded the entrance. The cornier has instructed the police to arrest the man who opened the double door. Frank Barr, one of the stage employees, is being sought by the police. Mr. Traeger believes that he will be an important witness."
- ¹¹¹ "Iroquois Curtain Caught on Proscenium Light Board; Structural Defect Gave Chance for Deadly Blast."
- ¹¹² "Admit Changing Roof Skylights," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), 6 Jan 1904.
- ¹¹³ *Ibid.* This seems to be the officially accepted account of the snagging of the asbestos curtain, although some sources – Foy's biography, for example – make the claim that the wire upon which Nellie Reed would fly out in to the audience had caused the snag.
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Conclusion – History Does Not End So

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